Jump Cut was founded as a print publication by John Hess, Chuck Kleinhans, and Julia Lesage in Bloomington, Indiana, and published its first issue in1974. It was conceived as an alternative publication of media criticism—emphasizing left, feminist, and LGBTQ perspectives. It evolved into an online publication in 2001, bringing all its back issues with it.

JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

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Current issue
No. 54, fall 2012

THE FIRST WORD

The first word: an introduction
by the editors
Highlights and interconnections between essays in this issue.

ASIAN CINEMA AND TV DRAMA

"Family" in Li Yang's *Blind Shaft* and *Blind Mountain*
by Amanda Weiss
A look at globalization and the family in Li Yang's migrant films *Blind Shaft* (2003) and *Blind Mountain* (2007).

Migrant workers, women, and China's modernization on screen
by Jenny Kwok Wah Lau
Even though China's migrant workers constitute the biggest human migration in the world at this time the life circumstances of these workers receive little attention in Chinese cinema. This article explores how visual media, including installation arts, documentary films, and narrative films expose the often neglected issues of women migrants.

Defining the popular auteur, or what it means to be human within the machine
by Caroline Guo.
Review of *Director in Action: Johnnie To and the Hong Kong Action Film* by Stephen Teo. Stephen Teo tackles Johnnie To's multifaceted role in the Hong Kong film industry: this review picks up where his monograph leaves off to grapple with the filmmaker's ongoing evolution and rethink the notion of the "popular auteur."

Negotiating censorship: *Narrow Dwelling* as social critique
by Wing Shan Ho
Housing crisis and extra-marital affair—this essay explores how the TV drama *Narrow Dwelling* skillfully critiques social inequalities under the censor's eye.

Digital pleasure palaces: Bollywood seduces the global Indian at the multiplex
by Manjunath Pendakur
Malls, multiplexes and digital cinemas are symbols of the fast-modernizing, neoliberal India of the 21st century and, in these turbulent conditions, Bollywood is expanding its audiences at home and abroad while the political-economic-technological changes have resulted in new conflicts and a reshaping of the film industry's internal structure and operation.

THEMES IN HOLLYWOOD AND OTHER CINEMAS

1. Race/ethnicity

2. The Mideast

3. History

4. Institutions: Law, Production, Exhibition

5. Queering the entertainment

by Patrick Bingham
Jeepers Queerpers explores the complex relation between the slasher film, (homo)sexuality and monstrosity.

RuPaul's Drag Race as meta-reality television
by Nicholas de Villiers
RuPaul's Drag Race—considered as a "meta-text" that incorporates and parodies *Paris Is Burning, America's Next Top Model,* and *Project Runway*—demonstrates how drag-as-citation destabilizes notions of originality, and how queer culture is passed on in the age of new media.

DOCUMENTARY

Framing the world economics in a tuna can:
Luc Moullet tracks the *Origins of a Meal/ Genèse d'un repas* (1978)
by Audrey Evrard
Insisting that the globalization of French economy should be seen as a perfected form of colonialism, Luc Moullet's documentary is as relevant to today's viewers as it was to its initial audience over thirty years ago. Where contemporary films often vilify corporate interests, Moullet prefers to point to shared responsibility in the devastating exploitative nature of the global food trade.

Truth in the mix:
Frederick Wiseman's construction of the observational microphone
by Giovanna Chesler
By closely examining the construction of soundtracks in Frederick Wiseman's documentaries *High School* and *Domestic Violence*, Chesler explores how sound editing in observational-style documentary provides a seemingly continuous foundation that enables storytelling and editing techniques more familiar to fiction filmmaking.

Consciousness-raising and difference in
The Woman's Film (1971) and *Self-Health* (1974)
by Shilyh Warren
To reconsider the aesthetic legacies and political fantasies of feminist documentaries of the 1970s means that we also have to come to terms with some of their real rhetorical limitations.

On suffering and human eloquence:
commemorating 9/11, televised U.S. coverage in 2011
by Isabel Pinedo.
Televised programs commemorating the tenth anniversary of 9/11 sought to construct redemptive narratives of various kind, but the most powerful, the mini-eulogies and the documentary approach, revolved around human affect in contrasting ways.

Streaming death: the politics of dying on YouTube
by Jennifer Malkowski
Documentary footage of two violent deaths—Oscar Grant's and Neda Agha-Soltan's—circulating on YouTube reveals the promise and perils of activist Internet video.

Julia Bacha's *Budrus* (Palestine), Ali Samadi Ahadi's *The Green Wave* (Iran),
Leonard Retel Helmrich's *Position Among the Stars* (Indonesia) — transnational
collaborations for art and impact in new documentary cinema
by Daniel Miller
Three contemporary documentaries are attracting notice as they go out from festivals into

the world to do real work.

[Media activists for livability: an NFB experiment in 1970s Vancouver](#)
by Jean Walton
In the early 1970s, the National Film board brought its Challenge for Change Program to a troubled suburb on Canada's West Coast, putting cameras into the hands of disenfranchised residents. The land use battles that ensued complicated Vancouver's image as the Shangri-La of the North.

[Give me shelter: the ecology of the home in *Blue Vinyl* and *Libby, Montana*](#)
by Robin L. Murray and Joseph Heumann
In *Blue Vinyl* and *Libby, Montana*, it's not just how you live and how you build your home, it's where you live and what's around you that contribute to the everyday eco-disasters associated with constructing and sustaining shelter.

EXPERIMENTAL & NEW MEDIA

[Identity, interactivity and performativity in Michelle Citron's *Queer Feast*](#)
by Kathleen Scott
An exploration of interactive narrative and form in the work of experimental filmmaker Michelle Citron.

[Video games, cognitive capital, the cognitariat, and the dream factory's seedy streets: patrolling the citizenry of *LA Noire*](#)
by Dennis Broe and Ken Cohen in conversation
A critical discussion of *LA Noire*, a game that claimed to revolutionize the industry but which this article contends raises perennial questions relevant to gaming in general regarding the cognitariat, surveillance culture and the digital panopticon.

["Making it through":](#)
[sickness and health in Su Friedrich's *The Odds of Recovery*](#)
by William C. Wees
In vivid and intimate detail, Su Friedrich's autobiographical film offers literal and metaphorical views of the consequences of sickness and the pleasures of recovery.

[New media and politics: populist revolt, state control, and elections](#)
by Lyell Davies.
Review of Nadia Idle and Alex Nunns, eds., *Tweets From Tahrir: Egypt's Revolution as it Unfolded, in the Words of the People who Made it*; Evgeny Morozov ,*The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom*; Richard L. Fox and Jennifer M. Ramos, eds., *iPolitics: Citizens, Elections, and Governing in the New Media Era*

[Work-in-progress: Marie Menken and the mechanical representation of labor](#)
by Caroline Guo
Through her experimental short films, Marie Menken reveals how cinema's capacities lie not only in the mechanical workings of the camera but also the potentials of human labor, leading us to bigger reflections on the inextricable ties between filmmaking, labor, and modern society.

[*The Cry of Jazz* and the expressive politics of music and race](#)
by Chuck Kleinhans
An interview with Ed Bland, director of the landmark 1959 film on jazz music and African Americans in U.S. society, reveals the context of the experimental documentary's argument and analysis.

CRITICAL ANALYSES

[Should the Dark Knight Have Risen?](#)
by Todd McGowan
The radical politics of Christopher Nolan's new film lies in Bane's voice and in its critique of the idea of harmony and balance, as represented by Miranda Tate.

[The rape-revenge film: biocultural implications](#)
by David Andrews
This article looks at rape-revenge movies from a biocultural perspective, using sexual-selection theory to understand rape-revenge conventions.

[Feeling and form in the films of Claire Denis](#)
by Ian Murphy
Shattering the laws of traditional narrative, Denis' films *Beau travail* (1999) and *Vendredi soir* (2002) promote a purely rhythmic form that calls for a deeper mode of viewer engagement – with the screen, and with the self.

[Time after time: cinema, trauma, and (a)temporality](#)
by Allan Cameron.
Review of Todd McGowan's *Out of Time: Desire in Atemporal Cinema*

THE LAST WORD

[Days of whines and ruses](#)
by the editors
Non-electoral concerns: class, race, sex and higher ed/media studies

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[To top](#)   *Jump Cut* [home](#)

The first word: an introduction

by the editors

This new issue of *Jump Cut*, fat and sassy as ever, has many interconnections between its essays. We do not usually write an introduction to an issue, like a preface to a book, but we find so many conceptual ties between these essays, beyond those indicated by their groupings in the table of contents, that we would like to point some of these out. If, in fact, the description of some article piques your interest, a hotlink will take you directly to it. In addition to the fact that the essays speak to each other in a remarkable way, this issue marks a new level of visuality. Writers submitting to *Jump Cut* now often think beforehand about how certain images might best accompany their work, and in a number of cases the essays here are accompanied by visual essays apart from the text. Also exceptional in this collection of essays is the way that, on a theoretical level, authors often provide a useful, cogent précis of the most salient literature applicable to the media under consideration, and many of the essays themselves make important new contributions to cultural theory and history. And, as always, by reading essays from many countries, our readers will learn about new films, often outside the Hollywood system, and new takes on films and television programs they might have already seen. Furthermore, with *Jump Cut*'s ongoing emphasis on media's social context and use in political activism, many of the current articles discuss activist media both historically and in its current manifestations, especially as activists use cell phone and Internet communication.

We have organized the table of contents to issue 54 by geographical area, genre, and theme. However, that organization is reductive and does not acknowledge many other themes and concerns that essays focus on. Such themes include gender, globalization, history, political activism, racial representation, cinematic form, genre—especially melodrama, and the Internet and new media. In addition, although one section bears the title, "Institutions: law, production, and exhibition," other essays scattered throughout the issue also offer important ways to rethink media institutions both past and present.

Gender

The first, and perhaps most salient tie between the essays is that many writers focus on aspects of race and/or gender and use these social reference points for case studies of relevant media—or vise versa, they use selected media examples to provide critical insights into these still problematic social areas. For example, many of the essays interweave a consideration of gender, as narrativized in film and television, and specific national and local conditions shaping both gender expectations and women's opportunities and desires within their specific social contexts. In this light, three of the essays dealing with Chinese media—by Amanda Weiss, Jenny Kwok Wah Lau, and Wing Shan Ho—explore in detail how Chinese narrative fictions articulate clashes between old and new values, changes in the family, and women's desires and economic possibilities in a contemporary, globalized, Chinese economy. Looking at an older tradition in India, Srimati Mukherjee explores how a contemporary adaptation of a Tagore novel reveals how Bengali widows, exemplified by the protagonist, still have only a limited framework within which to express sexual desire and social agency. And turning to the genre of contemporary documentary, Daniel Miller describes the making and impact of one longitudinal, lyrical documentary from Indonesia that also treats this kind of generational shift from rural to urban, from traditional values to a consumer culture, finally encapsulated in the problems and desires of one teen girl of the third generation who does not understand or embrace what her older family members knew or endured.

Considering gender across the various platforms of film, television, and the Internet, and various levels of media text and media reception, four essays on queer media employ a variety of theoretical approaches. Presenting Michelle Citron's interactive narrative quartet, Queer Feast, Kathleen Scott introduces an important queer work that that the artist has made available for free on the Internet. Michelle Citron is perhaps best known for her experimental film *Daughter Rite*, one of the classics of 70s second wave feminism. *Queer Feast* has some of the characteristics of that film. Again Citron uses many forms of image capture; mixes documentary, fiction, and autobiography; and challenges her viewers to construct narrative meanings as they follow different interactive choices that will vary from viewer to viewer. Scott uses Judith Butler's concept of performativity to describe both the on-screen media and the effect of viewers having to construct their own experience. The political significance of this work lies in the narrative "matrices formed by the intersections of desire, the power dynamics of gender performativity, identity formation, and assimilation."

In contrast to the privacy of Internet browsing is the most public kind of queer viewership, that of queer film festivals. Ger Zielinski uses Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia to describe the functions and varied effects of such festivals—heterotopia referring a space apart, perhaps marginalized, but socially endowed with a certain meaning both by its inhabitants—brief though that may be—and by mainstream society. Zielinski describes the social aspects of attending a festival

from standing in line and buying tickets and seeing who's there, to the kind of films/video seen and the logic of their programming, to possible disruption by state authorities especially in repressive cultures. As Zielinski analyzes it, the queer film festival is a varied and contested space. Its contemporary international proliferation not only provides for gay visibility but often becomes the locus of an open political struggle.

Considering ways that genres can become queered, three essays take up specific texts and analyze how they develop queer characters, queer themes, and queer texts or subtexts. Whitney Monaghan discusses how *Glee*, a teen television series with many queer characters has many opportunities to develop coming out stories, so that the show can deal more fully than many other dramas do with shifts in individuals' identities and different moments of "out-ness." With a slasher film as a text, *Jeepers Creepers 2,* Patrick Bingham extends Harry Benshoff's arguments about homosexuality and the horror film to explore the complex relation between the slasher film, (homo)sexuality, and monstrosity. And Nicholas de Villiers shows how *RuPaul's Drag Race*—a queer reality show that cites and parodies *Paris Is Burning, America's Next Top Model*, and *Project Runway*—can have a special meaning for the savvy fan. In the show, drag becomes citation yet its depiction also passes on queer culture in a hypermediated way.

Globalization

It is striking in this issue of *Jump Cut* how many authors analyze media from an international perspective, both in terms of the texts they deal with and the fact that most media cross national lines. For example, two writers dealing with Asian media offer new and important perspectives on both national and globalized media structures and institutions, as well as consider narrative themes within dramas that depict globalization. In particular, the monograph by Manjunath Pendakur is a groundbreaking study of how malls, multiplexes, and digital cinemas have reshaped India's national film industry. He details the political economy of current distribution and exhibition strategies in India, where high-end, enclosed malls in urban areas have become an entertainment "destination" for families and youth while single screen theaters still serve poorer neighborhoods and more rural areas. We have personally seen how this change has affected film going in Seoul and Hong Kong, and now Pendakur invites *Jump Cut*'s international readers to compare the Indian example with their own countries. Certainly this essay serves as a model for future studies, more of which we would like to see published in *Jump Cut*. Pendakur also points out how producing films for an international diasporic market of Indians abroad has reshaped Hindi film production both in terms of content and profit.

Also demonstrating a specific model which could be applied to other countries, Wing Shan Ho describes in detail how a Chinese television series, *Narrow Dwelling*, uses a melodramatic form to deal with

contemporary women's problems, especially through narrative lines that focus on how urbanites find housing. In practical and political terms, the series can offer a social critique by placing its characters' problems against the background of China's neoliberal real estate development and property market. By focusing on a story about women, the producers could promote the script and later the finished program to national censors as having a "contemporary city theme," and thus escape official rejection as either a crime drama or an explicit political critique.

The theme of globalization both as a motif internal to the film narratives and as a structuring element in media making and distribution, as well as in state policy about the media, is taken up by many of the essays in this issue, including the ones I have just discussed above. Offering a perceptive history and analysis of the Iraq war, Patricia Ventura also details what she calls its "practicalities," including how troops are trained, supported by contractors and represented in mainstream culture. Fetishizing the soldier, she writes, has deterred people from mobilizing against the war, since the dominant motif is "support our troops," a call that promotes the constant militarization needed to maintain U.S. neoliberal capitalism. With a close analysis of the documentary *Gunner Palace*, Ventura demonstrates its formal similarity to the television show *Cops*.

Two authors analyze the narratives and potential effects of feature fictions that explicitly take up themes of globalization in their scripts. Kfir Cohen describes *Syriana*'s interweaving narrative strands, and the final perplexity the viewer feels while also sensing that the film has "taught something" about globalization. Cohen points out that this effect on audiences occurs because the narrative strands have demonstrated how global corporations have financialized every aspect of daily life. As Cohen puts it, corporations no longer just influence the political sphere but have led to the economic becoming the political. Also taking up a feature fiction film with interweaving narrative strands that explicitly incorporate "globalization" as a theme, Leisa Rothlisberger analyzes *Babel* both in terms of how the film portrays victimization and the film's status as an international co-production. Like Ventura and Cohen, Rothlisberger calls for more progressive media to address the hierarchies perpetuated by global networks, what she calls the "uneven logic of border crossing."

Taking up a similar theme but with an older film, a pioneering documentary on consumption, production, and the international food trade is Audrey Evrard's analysis of Luc Moullet's *Origins of a Meal/ Genèse d'un repas* (1978). Evrard points out that while many contemporary documentaries find their villain in corporate interests, as Moullet travels the world to film France's international food trade, he finds that food's globalization is a perfected form of colonialism—in effect, France's working class benefits from the exploitation as does the middle class, and by implication the viewers of the film. Just as Moullet developed a perspective on an international problem from

inside the country affected by it, so does Julio García Espinosa in a fictional film, this time about Cuba's relation to the exile community in Miami. Mariana Johnson presents the *Reina y Rey*, a melodrama from contemporary Cuba that explicitly transforms the returning exile into the tourist, as former house owners return to try to recruit their old servant Reina to return to Miami with them as a nanny. Johnson describes the changes in Cuba after the Special Period, i.e., the breakup of the Soviet Union and the loss of Russian economic support, and also how the Cubans have changed in their attitude toward emigrés to the United States, seeing them now as potentially bringing money back to Cuba. She finds the film a wry comment on life in Cuba today.

Go to page 2

"Family" in Li Yang's
Blind Shaft and *Blind Mountain*

by Amanda Weiss

By analyzing two films by director Li Yang, *Blind Shaft* (2003) and *Blind Mountain* (2007), I hope to explore how Li's migrant narratives portray the human cost of China's problematic globalization process. Drawing on Rey Chow's reading of *Blind Shaft* (2003), I focus on "family" (lineage/ education/ togetherness) in these films and its relation to the uprooting process of globalization through the concepts *honghuo* and Chow's "sentimental fabulations." Finally, I conclude that the messy changes of China in flux mean that "family" as a remedy or source of comfort in China's rapidly changing economic reality is ultimately problematic—in fact, the perversion of the migrant/ worker/ peasant family offers a suggestive metaphor for the failures of Chinese modernization.[1] [open endnotes in new window]

Synopsis: *Blind Shaft* (2003)

Blind Shaft (2003, dir. Li Yang) is a dark Hitchcockian tale of two migrant workers turned con artists who murder coal miners in order to extort insurance money from mine operators. The film is based on Liu Qingbang's 2002 Lao She Literature Prize-winning novel *Sacred Wood* (Shenmu), which in turn is inspired by China's notorious coalmine safety problem. China is the largest producer of coal in the world, yet its coal mines are infamous for lax safety standards and deadly accidents (such as a shaft flooding that killed 173 miners in 2007). Even China's state-owned newspaper *Xinhua* acknowledges the problem's severity. In 2004 it reported coal mining as the deadliest job in China, with China producing 50% of the world's coal but 80% of mining-related deaths.[2] Li presents his narrative against the backdrop of this well-publicized social issue.

Blind Shaft: The miners trek across a desolate, colorless landscape. The realistic setting and acting in the film is juxtaposed against a tightly controlled Hitchcockian suspense.

Blind Shaft: A smiling Song strikes the first victim a lethal blow

The mine recedes in the distance.

In the first scene of *Blind Shaft*, con artists Song and Tang bludgeon a miner to death in the shaft, blaming his untimely demise on a lack of mine safety. The con artists have presented the miner as a family member, so the mine pays them for the loss of their relative in order to avoid further repercussions. After receiving the payoff, the con artists go in search of a new victim. Soon they find their next target, a sixteen-year-old migrant named Yuan, who is searching for his missing father. At this point, the film distinguishes between the "bad" con artist and the "good" con artist, as Song becomes increasingly afflicted by guilt. His own son, whom he has not seen for years, would be the same age as Yuan. Additionally, Song recalls that one of their previous victims was also named Yuan and could potentially be Yuan's missing father. Tang perceives Song's changing conscience and developing father-son relationship with Yuan as weakness. The two con artists disagree over whether or not to murder Yuan, with Song grudgingly agreeing to continue with the plan. They decide to take Yuan to a prostitute before murdering him, but the boy is embarrassed and morally offended by the encounter, lamenting that he has "become a bad man" and that "[his] life is over." In the penultimate scene, Tang attempts to kill both Song and Yuan with a pickaxe. However, despite surprising Song with a preemptive blow, Song is able to kill Tang and thus protect Yuan before ultimately succumbing to his injuries. Ironically, the mine owners quickly pay off a confused Yuan for the loss of his "family members." The film ends with the cremation of Tang and Song, Yuan waiting outside to collect their ashes.

Synopsis: *Blind Mountain* (2007)

Meanwhile, in *Blind Mountain* (2007, dir. Li Yang), college graduate Bai Xuemei searches for work in order to pay her parents back for their investment in her education. However, she soon discovers that she has in fact been duped and sold to a rural family in order to provide a wife for their son. The girl spends her "wedding day" bound and gagged in bed, not even physically a party to the wedding. Later, when unbound, she desperately attempts to escape. She also angrily spurns the halfhearted sexual advances of her "husband," Huang Degui.

Blind Mountain: Li often juxtaposes images of nature after scenes of intense violence.

Gorgeous scenes of nature show a seemingly peaceful countryside as Xuemei finds work for the first time.

Enraged by her defiance and motivated by a desire for offspring, the entire family participates in Xuemei's rape. Her mother and father-in-law hold her down and strip her, encouraging Degui to consummate their "marriage." Degui appears to derive little enjoyment from the rape, yet he passively obeys his parents. After this scene, Degui becomes more forceful and violent in his confrontations with Xuemei over her attempts to escape.

Unsuccessful, Xuemei initiates an affair with a local teacher (Degui's cousin, Decheng), begging for his help. When the villagers discover the affair, Decheng leaves the village and abandons Xuemei. Afterwards, she sleeps with a shopkeeper for 50 yuan (U.S. ~$8), again in exchange for help. The community conspires to collectively stop her attempt to flee the village, and she is finally impregnated, bearing a child.

Blind Mountain: In the international DVD release, Xuemei kills Degui with an axe after failing to stop him from beating her father.

One year later, Xuemei's father arrives at the village with police and a police van, but even then the law is ineffective. The villagers reject his claim, pull Xuemei from the van, and force her father to bargain for the price of Xuemei's release. She remains in the village. Finally, her father hires men to come rescue her. The men incapacitate Degui, but Xuemei's mother-in-law refuses to hand over Xuemei's son. Xuemei and the village's other kidnapped women rush to the car, one woman begging at the last minute to be let go so she can remain with her child. As the truck speeds away from the village, Xuemei gazes back at her mother-in-law. Mrs. Huang chases the van determinedly, the abandoned child clutched in her arms. Xuemei's expression is ambivalent as she moves further and further away from the village.

In the Chinese version, Xuemei is forced to abandon her child.

As the van drives away, she gazes back at her abandoned child.

Migration: a background

Li Yang's two films tackle the complicated situation facing migrants during China's globalization—in Chinese, often described as a "march towards the world." Clearly, globalization is a divisive force and has in many ways increased class stratification. China's development project relies heavily on the cheap labor force of rural migrants. Yet, as Li Zhang notes,

Blind Shaft: The mine owner demands all exits blocked. Here, Li is depicting the notorious corruption of mine owners and one of the side effects of cutthroat development—disregard for the lives of workers.

Blind Mountain: Xuemei waits patiently as her employers negotiate her "job." The villagers surround her, enveloping her figure in shadow. She does not yet realize that she is the commodity being inspected.

"Migrants are frequently depicted as ignorant, poverty-stricken, and envious of the urban affluence they lack."[3]

The workers are outsiders both exploited for cheap labor and scapegoated for everything from rising crime to congested buses, the heroes of the Mao Era often perceived (by urbanites) as the flotsam of the cities. As Lisa Rofel notes, in mainstream public discourse,

"workers appear in official and elite commentary on the obstacles that might hinder China from ever reaching modernity."[4]

In Chinese, there are a number of derogatory terms for migrant, including *liudong renkou* (floating/drifting population), *waidiren* (people from outside), *wailairenkou* (population coming from outside), and *mangliu* (literally "blind flow" or drifting). Many of these pejoratives characterize the "flow" as blind, and workers as "outsiders." Notably, Li Yang's two films featuring migration and rural poverty, *Blind Shaft* (2003) and *Blind Mountain* (2007), also use the term "mang" in their titles. However, Li's usage of the term of the term is layered—Tang and Song, formerly migrant workers, have become morally bankrupt and thus directionless in their migration. Xuemei's migration does not end with the promised job, but kidnapping and rape. By problematizing the migration depicted in these films, Li by extension also problematizes China's own migratory "walk to the world." A second meaning is directed at the audience: Li is stridently pointing out blind ignorance (or purposeful ignoring) of China's migrant problem.

In one chapter in her book on modernity's meaning in a swiftly changing China, Lisa Rofel addresses the different realities facing male and female workers during the market transition. She notes that Hangzhou markets were filled with peasants from outside the city, and that "a dangerous and exciting masculinity thrived in this arena."[5] She contrasts the young men—who dominated these markets and who were demonstrating their "worth as men" by "showing their daring, savvy, strength, and ability to entice"—against the status of women.[6] Women, "by contrast, [were] viewed as too brazen, as bad women," and in danger of being exploited economically and sexually.[7] Rofel, though, is very much aware of the exploitation of both male and female workers. She discusses the "decentering of

workers" and the "feminized subaltern" subjugation of both male and female migrants.[8] While among migrant workers the female workers are perceived as inappropriate participants and particularly vulnerable to exploitation, within the larger question of Chinese globalization, both male and female workers are oppressed and feminized.

Blind Mountain: Throughout the film men are portrayed as violent and chauvinist. Male villagers often encourage Degui to beat or rape his wife in order to control her.

Post-rape, Degui smokes a cigarette with his father. In this world, men and women are isolated from each other.

For Chinese laborers, reasons for migration range from making money to self-improvement. Whereas money might seem to be the primary motivation, migrants actually have varied, complex reasons for their movement. Migration not only provides the economic opportunity to attain upward mobility,[9] but also contributes to the individuals' developing self-reliance and subjectivity. For example, in Tamara Jacka's interviews with rural migrant women in Beijing, reasons for migration were diverse. Motives included making money, travel, escape, "changing one's fate," and self-development, with money "not usually described as the main motivation."[10] Ironically, while migrants are the key to China's globalization, they are also pilloried by public opinion as they attempt to navigate China's problematic globalization and their own changing attitudes and subjectivities. Against this paradoxical backdrop, Li Yang demonstrates the effect of China's economic development on individual migrants.

Migration on film

In cinema, the films of the "Urban Generation" (also known as the 'Sixth Generation') [11] frequently employ the figure of the migrant worker to discuss China's modernization. The country/ city divide—characterized by the urbanization of China and the "ideological downgrading of the peasantry in favor of socialist-capitalism and national entrepreneurship"—provides plot conflicts for films of the 1990s to the present day.[12] Protagonists are often the disenfranchised of Chinese urban centers: starving artists, prostitutes, criminals, and migrant workers. As Zhang Zhen states, by concentrating on China's third world living in the midst of its first world, these filmmakers expose imperfections in China's globalizing urban landscape.[13] The Urban Generation filmmakers seem particularly interested in the plight of the floating population because the situation of the migrants also registers the change from a socialist to a post-socialist capitalist society.

Migrant worker Gui carries his broken bicycle

"Shoulder-pole" Dongzi walks among city

Li Yang's films, however, present a departure from these filmmakers' work. Part of the reason for this could be his own unique positioning. He did not graduate from the Beijing Film Academy, but rather, being both German-educated and a German citizen, his identity is decidedly transnational.[14] In other Urban Generation films, the city/ country binary is clear—rural migrants are shown attempting to move "forward" economically, technologically, and spatially within a hostile city. By contrast, Li complicates the urban/ rural narratives found in films like *So Close to Paradise* (1998, dir. Wang Xiaoshuai), *Beijing Bicycle* (2000, dir. Wang Xiaoshuai), and *Lost in Beijing* (2007, dir. Li Yu) by avoiding the city entirely. While the theme of migration is still present in his films, his characters are rural migrants or somewhat educated individuals searching for work in rural places. Li's films largely reject simplistic spatial binaries, complicating the meaning of migration. Li's films further stress the violence of migration and its opposing force, the desire for "family" (togetherness/ lineage/ education). As such, the concepts *guanxi*, *honghuo* and "warm sentimentalism" are useful starting points for discussion.

Blind Shaft: As part of the con, Tang and Song adopt two roles—the family member, and the negotiator. Tang cries as the bereaved family member and...

... Song uses family relations as a bargaining tool.
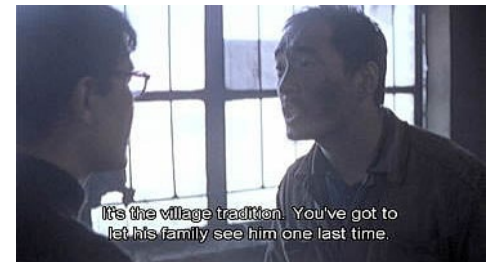
"Family": *honghuo* and warm sentimentalism

In the Chinese context the family, *guanxi*, *honghuo*, and *renao* (excitement, flourishing) form essential components shaping these narratives. *Guanxi* means "relations," not only in the business sense, but also as in familial and sexual relations. Cultivating good relations is important both socially and economically in China, especially now. For example, one recent study suggests that Chinese workers' reliance on *guanxi* for entry into the labor force rose from 40% in the 1960s to 75% in the 1990s.[15] Indeed, in Li Yang's films overlapping business, family and sexual *guanxi* dominate the issues plaguing migrant worker families. As for *honghuo* or *renao,* they connote a kind of "social heat," using Adam Chau's terminology. In his study on rural communities in northern China, Chau notes:

Blind Mountain: Xuemei sits locked in her room as her wedding occurs outside.

> "The key component of *honghuo* is people; the more people, the more *honghuo*. Embedded in this belief is a premium put on the warmth or heat generated from human sociality and a fear of, or distaste for, social isolation, which is associated with loneliness and coldness."[16]

Honghuo is associated with a desire to foster healthy *guanxi*. Additionally, the longing for *honghuo* as in *home* is also tied into this concept. Peasants told Chau:

> "...as trees set down their roots, it is important for people to beget children...having no children is not *honghuo* (*bu honghuo*), making a household cold and desolate and its occupants feeling lonely and sad...."[17]

The communal wedding celebrations conflict with Xuemei's quiet trepidation at her impending rape, invoking the image of a virgin sacrifice.

It takes the participation of Degui's parents to "consummate the marriage."

The perverted rape emphasizes Xuemei's role in the village.

She is a purchased womb and possession. Her domination represents Degui's manhood.

Degui's mother works as negotiator and spy.

The mother tries to persuade Xuemei to submit to the marriage. Degui and his father never converse with Xuemei or ...

... explain their reasons for kidnapping her. A weaknesses of *Blind Mountain* is a lack of characterization of the men in the village.

As seen in *Blind Mountain*, the Chinese desire for a *honghuo* family environment (characterized in the film by the Confucian patrilineal impulse to have descendants) triggers the purchase, rape and pregnancy of Xuemei. For the Huang family, who exist outside of Chinese modernity in their stagnant rural backwater, the forced creation of *honghuo* becomes a matter of survival. As we watch Xuemei's mother-in-law resolutely pursue the van while clutching Xuemei's child awkwardly in her arms, her pitiful chase problematizes the victory of Xuemei's escape. As sadistic and perverse as her treatment of Xuemei is, in this final scene our sympathy as an audience is split—Xuemei's education, youth, fertility and vitality are essential for the survival of the village. With her departure, there is no possibility of *honghuo,* and thus little chance of saving the village.

Go to page 2

Images from *Blind Shaft*:

In a later scene in the film, Yuan meets the prostitute, Xiao Hong. Like Yuan, Xiao Hong is a migrant worker sending money home to her family. In *Blind Shaft*, Li shows complex migrant workers struggling during globalization. *Blind Mountain,* on the other hand, does not show sympathy towards the Huang family.

Song (left) and Tang (right) descend into the mineshaft with their first victim, whose last name is Yuan. ...

...This sets up Song's later moral quandary, when he fears that this victim is the father of the child they choose as their next victim.

Rey Chow's *Sentimental Fabulations*, with its complex discussion of the sentimental (a "predominant affective mode"),[18] [open endnotes in new window] touches on the concept of family in these films. Chow's project is a theoretical look at the concept of the sentimental and its relation to global visibility. She uses Chinese film and China's specific cultural and historical positioning as departure points to discuss the sentimental in more depth. Chow first elaborates on the different meanings suggested by the concept *sentimental*, and later defines her own usage of the term. She begins with Friedrich Schiller's definition of the sentimental as "a modern creative attitude marked by a particular self-consciousness of loss," which she notes is important also for its relation to time:

> "As an affective state triggered by a sense of loss, sentimentalism was, for Schiller, the symptom of the apprehension of an irreversible temporal differentiation or the passing of time."[19]

Chow then turns to Anglo-American humanities, and notes that there

> "the sentimental… clearly occupies a place that has much to do with *the enduringly fraught ethics of human society as mediated by art and fiction* [Chow's emphasis]."[20]

In other words, in this second sense sentimentalism reveals a great deal about human social interaction, themes of power, control, justice and consciousness, and their relation to the media in which they are represented. Chow ultimately considers the sentimental more useful as a "discursive constellation" than as simple "affective excess."[21] As such, she expands on the concept of the sentimental with the idea of "warm sentimentalism."

Turning to the Chinese context, Chow elaborates the term *wenqingzhuyi* or warm sentimentalism—a term that brings to mind the idea of *honghuo*'s "social heat." The concept is unique in that it is characterized by the "mild, tender, tolerant, obliging, [and] forbearing."[22] Chow further defines sentiment in this context as

> "an inclination or a disposition toward making compromises and toward making-do and even—and especially—that which is oppressive and unbearable."[23]

She suggests that whereas Freud saw the sentiment as the overflow of the suppressed, she would counter that the sentimental is characterized by what is kept and preserved, by what "holds things together," and is rather a "mood of endurance."[24]

Chow further links warm sentimentalism to the home/ family/ interior. She notes,

> "The modes of human relationships affectively rooted in [the] imagined inside—an inside whose depths of feeling tend to become intensified with the perceived aggressive challenges posed by modernity—are what I would argue as sentimental."[25]

In other words, the family/ home is an important location for the sentimental because of the perceived tension between the inside and the outside. Chow continues,

> "…the sentimental is ultimately about the delineation and elaboration

Song sends funds home to his son. In this scene Tang is also seen lining up at the bank. However Li does not show whether Tang also sends money home.

As the more sympathetic con artist, Song cares for his family and shows concern for the young Yuan.
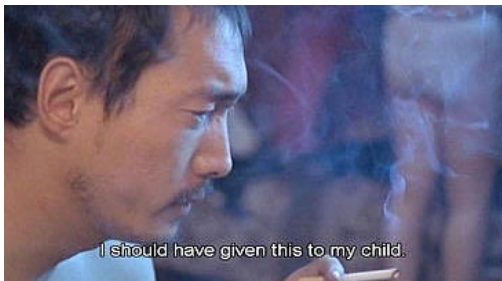
Song regrets spending money on a prostitute, lamenting that he should have given it to his son.

of a comfortable/homely interiority, replete with the implications of exclusion that such delineation and elaboration by necessity entail."[26]

It is notable that Chow's list of situations wherein the sentimental occurs include themes central to migrants—labor and family. Her situations include:

- filiality;
- domesticity;
- preparation, consumption, sharing and/or offering of food;
- poverty;
- childhood and old age;
- sight or knowledge of physical labor;
- togetherness and separation (such as caused by migration);
- preference for familial/social harmony and reconciliation;
- passing of time;
- manifestations of nature; and
- the non-negotiable imperative to reproduce biologically.[27]

For migrants the tension between the imagined inside/outside is central. These characters are outsiders spatially (as strangers from another place), metaphorically (as perceived obstacles to China's modernization), and linguistically—as *wailairenkou* (population coming from outside, incoming population) and *waidiren* (people from outside). A desire for a "homely interiority"—literally as in a home and figuratively as in a feeling of acceptance in China's changing order—is thus desirable, yet inaccessible to migrants due to the problematic nature of globalization. It is in this tension, a tension that often occurs in scenes about family/home, that we see the "drama of the sentimental"—a drama that reveals the ambiguity of "family" during Chinese modernization.

Blind Shaft (2003)

In *Blind Shaft*, this dramatic tension is centered on the concept of "family." First, Song and Tang use kinship as a commodity, killing "family members" and selling the loss of their "relative" for money. Chow notes,

> "The key to the entire scam is, in other words, the fabrication of a particular unit of social organization—namely, the kinship family—that appeals to others as something natural and authentic...."[28]

It is through the creation of family relations that the two men create legitimacy that can be cashed in on in a market economy, a perverted application of capitalism. As one of the mine owners in the film notes, there is "no shortage" of human beings in China.

The bodies of "family" (as in fellow Chinese) become commodities in modernizing China. [29] In other words, somehow during the process of globalization, the family is monetized. Additionally, the murder of family can be seen as a metaphor for the conflicted nature of globalization—Li's narrative suggests that China's new economic system relies on the "murder" of its own people. In an economy dependent on the labor of its people, the bodies of the citizens become a kind of capital. In overusing them, abusing them, or tossing them in the system without adequate preparation or protection, the country sacrifices its family to the markets.

The film also invokes family through scenes of filiality, the idealization of which is, according to Chow, possibly the central notion of Chinese sentimentalism.[30] The younger murderer in *Blind Shaft*—Song Jinming—becomes guilt-ridden after witnessing the obedient filial piety of his next potential victim, Yuan Fengming. Suddenly family becomes an agent of change and potential redemption. Sixteen-year-old Fengming expresses nothing but respect for his elders and sees in Song a

What separates Song from Tang is his concern for Yuan's family line.

An unwilling Yuan is forced to visit a prostitute. Tang and Song intend the visit as both a gift and a way to assuage their guilt—making Yuan "become a man" before they kill him. ...

... Instead, Yuan interprets the forced encounter as an assault on his moral integrity, crying that he has "become a bad man."

The studious Yuan is always seen with a book in hand. As the moral center of the film ...

kind of paternal figure. He worships and obeys the elder migrant, obediently retiring to bed when Song orders him to sleep. When Fengming disappears in a market—causing his two would-be killers to panic—he suddenly reappears with a chicken that he has purchased for his elders out of respect and devotion. Song slaps the boy, but his reaction is ambivalent: is Song afraid of losing his target/source of income, or is he afraid for the safety of the boy, whose strong sense of filial piety is endearing? Fengming appears to remind Song of his own son, who—like Yuan—also left home to work, and of his responsibilities as a father. Neither Tang nor Yuan have returned home in years, both lacking a sense of responsibility as the heads of their households.

Song also becomes concerned that a man he killed (also surnamed Yuan) might potentially be the missing father of Yuan Fengming.[31] Conflicted, Song laments the prospect of ending the Yuan family line and of offending their ancestors. However, Li Yang is purposely ambiguous and does not reveal if Song would have chosen the moral path in the end: Tang strikes Song a mortal blow before the audience can see whether Song would have saved the boy. Li's choice to leave Song's paternal existential crisis unresolved suggests ambiguity about Song's ability to overcome the compelling desire for money and perhaps an uncertainty about China's moral future as well.

The search for family is another situation in which the sentimental occurs—the search itself a kind of existential migration. Yuan, as the sole moral light in the film, has left his home in search of his father. He is also migrating to earn the funds necessary for his education and moral enrichment. His migration differs from that of Song and Tang, whose migration is primarily motivated by money. Yuan, who is constantly reading and studying in the hopes of self-improvement and who is, moreover, irrepressibly filial, is the film's most ethical character. The prostitute he sleeps with also demonstrates her filiality by sending money home to her family.

However, Yuan's character is complicated by his participation in the scam, which is contingent on the target's willingness to misrepresent himself as a relative. When Tang first meets Yuan, the boy very quickly agrees to the ruse, thus demonstrating his potential for duplicity. Additionally, after very weak protesting at the end of the film, Yuan accepts money from the mine for the deaths of Song and Tang. As such, he is potentially learning the value of commoditizing relatives, and his future may or may not coincide with that of the two con men. In the final shot of the film, Yuan watches smoke rise from the cremation facility burning the corpses of the two con men. Yuan's expression—at times befuddled, at times contemplative—does not clearly reveal what lessons he has learned from his experience.

The pursuit of education, not listed in Chow's sentimental situations, might also be considered a location of the sentimental in *Blind Shaft*. Indeed, the importance of education is vital in the Chinese family context. In the film the lack of education—moral or otherwise—is a core theme and measure of morality in modernizing China. Director Li Yang notes,

> "When I asked coal miners about what kept them going regardless of the dangers of working in the mines, the response I got over and over was that they needed to send their kids to school."[32]

In his personal research, Li discovered the importance of education in the parent-child relationship and in preserving the migrant family. However, Tang lacks

... Yuan's intentions for money are also education-related. He hopes to send his sister and then himself back to school.

education, Song laments his son's abandonment of school, and Yuan is forced to work because he cannot pay for school.

Chow, in a very astute reading, considers why the semi-illiterate character Tang appears to be the film's most evil character. She wonders—is there a correlation between Tang's lack of education and his "evilness"? Tang is hardened, nasty and malevolent. He is the first to approach the boy Yuan Fengming—wolf-like—as a potential victim. When Song criticizes Tang for choosing an adolescent victim, Tang retorts,

> "I don't care if he is a child or an adult. As long as I can make money, it's fine. If you had money, then your child wouldn't have to leave and go to work. You feel sorry for [Yuan], but who will feel sorry for you?"

Tang also appears to be dismissive of the education of others. When Yuan Fengming happens upon a begging child holding a sign asking for school tuition, he gives the boy some of his own hard-earned money. Upon witnessing Yuan Fengming give the child money, Tang gives the little boy a hard look and dismissively glances at what he knows must be written on the sign he ostensibly cannot read. "It must be fake," he grumbles. Tang's "evilness" is starkly contrasted to the purity of Yuan, who places a great deal of importance on education.

As noted by Chow, the lyrics to the song "Socialism is good" have changed. Tang only knows the older version, which is "tu," or "old-fashioned." ...

Yet Li Yang is also sympathetic to Tang's lack of education, which he blames on the changes affecting society. He emphasizes the conflicted nature of Tang's education by demonstrating that Tang's upbringing did not prepare him for the transition to a market economy. In one of the few humorous scenes in *Blind Shaft*, two KTV ("karaoke TV," a private karaoke room equipped with a television and couches) hostess girls/ prostitutes invert Tang's rendition of the song, "Socialism Is Good." They laugh that his version is *tu* (old-fashioned, uncouth, rural). One cannot help but pity the older Tang as the young girls mock him for his lack of style and knowledge. Additionally, in Li Yang's interview with Michael Berry, the director claims that the song was included in part to demonstrate that

> "the two main characters...received a socialist education. They were brought up singing songs like, 'Socialism Is Good'; however, they have been deserted by China's new social situation."[33]

Li's criticism here is aimed not at individuals, but at the government that did not prepare society for this change. Tang and Song's perversion of the market system does not just reveal their faults as individuals, but a much larger social problem.

... However, both he and Song adapt quickly to the new version.

It is notable that "family" is the site of both salvation and transgression in post-socialist China. For Tang and Song, their upbringing has not prepared them for the new economic system and has resulted in the depraved selling of kin/ breakdown of the family/ disregard of education. The filial, education-hungry Yuan represents the uncertain future of China. At play here is the idea of traditional/ "Confucian" values emerging in the market era. For example, is Li Yang arguing there is salvation in tradition? The film does not try to provide an answer to this question. Rather, it aims to show a country in economic and moral flux.

At the end of the film we are doubtful of Yuan's future prospects, as he has accepted tainted money—tainted both by his false claim as a nephew, and by the perverted capitalist greed that caused the deaths. However, because of this character's youth and decency, Li Yang leaves the ending open to hopeful interpretation.

The most "evil" character in the film, Tang, appears to be illiterate and also harbors distrust for education. Here he dismisses the child's plea for high school funds as fake.

A malevolent Tang prepares to kill Yuan.

Yuan is passive during the final scenes of negotiation for the lives of his "family members" Tang and Song.

A con man's body awaits cremation.

The camera tilts up from Yuan's face to the chimney the ashes of Tang and Song.
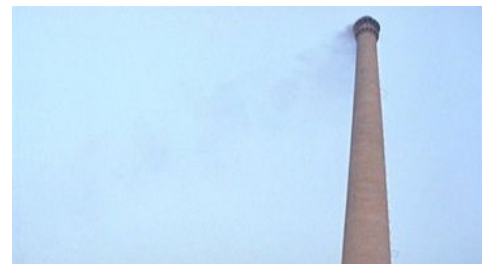
Li leaves the story open-ended for us. Will Yuan be morally tainted by this experience?

[Go to page 3](#)

Blind Mountain

The first time Xuemei has power is when she becomes pregnant. The mother begs her to keep the child.

Li Yang's *Blind Mountain* also explores ways in which migrant characters meet conflicting demands of globalization and family. In terms of Chow's sentimental situations, the narrative uses all the concepts of togetherness/ separation, family harmony (or lack thereof), and biological reproduction. As in *Blind Shaft*, family members are again a commodity. The Huang family purchases Xuemei to provide a wife for their son Degui, as well as a womb to continue the Huang family line. In purchasing Xuemei, they separate her from her own family and also cause another drama of separation. The relation to globalization is implied. The isolated village is practically pre-modern, shut off from the developed coastal region of China and stubbornly clannish in its interactions with outsiders. It is a village left behind in China's development.

In two different scenes, the image of a traumatized Xuemei is immediately juxtaposed against a peaceful natural landscape. The seemingly fertile land lacks the women it needs to ensure its population and continued existence.

The key location of the sentimental in *Blind Mountain* is the "imperative to reproduce." Xuemei's value as a commodity is contingent on her ability to reproduce. As an educated girl from a larger city, she is the fertile future of China: fertile because of her traits associated with globalization — education, youth, urbanity — and because of her femaleness/primitiveness. Her womb, her sexuality, her oppressed/subaltern subject positioning. She is in many ways not dissimilar to the pigs bred on her captors' farm: her sole purpose in being purchased is to breed future farmers for the Huangs. Even though by the time Xuemei is pregnant she has cheated on her husband with his cousin, her in-laws do not care about the father's identity. Mrs. Huang begs Xuemei not to cause an abortion, crying plaintively,

> "Our Huang family will be grateful to you forever!"

In other words, a Huang is a Huang. While the continuation of the Huang family line rests in Xuemei's hands at that point, she later has no claim to the child. When

With motherhood, we see Xuemei at peace in the setting. She is also filmed against warm colors and backgrounds.

Xuemei finally escapes at the end, she is notably unable to take her son. After the child's manufacture, Xuemei's work is done, but her child—the product—must remain.[34][open endnotes in new window]

Xuemei's father finally arrives at the village, but the child is a major point of contention. Xuemei's purpose was to bear a child, and this "commodity" cannot leave the village.

Like *Blind Shaft*, *Blind Mountain* depicts a society that has acclimated to and surpassed the ruthless market system, trading the bodies of human beings and purchasing "family." Xuemei is a commodity, her status as such usually defended by her "cost." Whenever she attempts to escape the village, her in-laws cite the amount of money they spent to purchase her, an argument that proves effective time and time again. When a real family member (her father) arrives to retrieve her, the community does not recognize his legitimacy, instead arguing that the only acceptable way to secure her retrieval is, in effect, a refund. Xuemei's father recognizes and resigns himself to this legitimacy, weeping over the money he has already spent to find his daughter and lamenting the fact that he now has to find more to purchase her back. In *Blind Mountain*, Xuemei's market value usurps her role as a daughter and her rights as a human being.

The ineffective police are unable to control the villagers. Like the con men of *Blind Shaft*, the villagers come from an era of socialism that has perverted the new capitalist system and commoditized the lives of people.

Even Xuemei learns to regard her body as a commodity. After simply running away does not work, she willingly sells her body for her escape. She starts her affair with Decheng, Degui's cousin, in the hopes that she can exchange love/sex for freedom. Each tryst begins at Xuemei's insistence with false professions of love, ending with her inquiries about the escape plan. However, Decheng is an ineffective savior who avoids taking action, is caught and leaves the village. In the scene after he leaves, Xuemei changes tactics, no longer relying on seduction and sentimental feelings such as "love" as a tactic. She sells sexual favors to a local shopkeeper for 50 yuan, and very nearly escapes in the following scene. This attempt is her most effective escape attempt in the film—in the new market economy, money talks.

Disregarded by the local government, Xuemei attempts suicide.

Even then, the hospital demands money before treatment. In this world, everything is fueled by money—the purchase of family, freedom and life.

A passing car ignores Xuemei. Xuemei's attempts to leave without money are all failures.

It takes a visit from fellow abducted wives to help Xuemei begin to adapt to her situation.The other kidnapped women also note that their in-laws refuse to give them money for fear that they might escape.

Indeed, in many recent Urban Generation films, prostitution is a major theme.[35] The sexualized/commoditized female body becomes a metaphor for Chinese modernity and nationality. Gail Hershatter establishes the symbiotic relationship between the status of women and the status of the nation:

> "[Woman was] the site at which national modernity was imaged, often through a language of crisis: If the status of women is not raised, if the factors that drive women into prostitution are not ameliorated, the nation will perish." [35a]

During times of colonization by foreign powers, the victimized woman was a symbol for a China "…threatened with 'penetration' by Western imperialism."[36]

In Chinese films of the 1930s, such as *Goddess* (1934, dir. Wu Yonggang), Chinese filmmakers filmed crises of nationhood through the bodies of marginalized females. In these earlier migrant films the woman is Han (racial majority of China), yet her presentation evokes minority discourse by virtue of the ways in which she is sexualized and eroticized. She is forced to capitalize on her sexualized body, yet she learns to succumb and adapt to the commoditization of herself. Perhaps in this way, she is sentimental in the sense of Chow's "mood of endurance." The migrant female in these films ultimately capitalizes on her own body in order to achieve her goals, attempting to maneuver her victimized position to one of (questionable) power.

Li Yang also ties the "imperative to reproduce" to the community through scenes of communal complicity. First, he demonstrates the unified front of the village (and also dryly satirizes socialist communalism) in the scene where Xuemei is raped. While playing cards with friends, friends goad husband Huang Degui to walk home (20 feet away) and finally consummate their relationship. Xuemei's violent reaction deters him and he fails to rape her, only to return immediately at the insistence of his parents. His parents hold Xuemei down, stripping her and forcing her legs apart, only leaving the room once the rape has commenced. Thus the rape is shown as a communal activity, first suggested by the men at the poker game and then enforced by Degui's parents. The community is physically present and verbally complicit.

Later, when Xuemei's father arrives to claim her, everyone in the village again unites in a proletariat struggle session reminiscent of the Cultural Revolution. The villagers become the revolutionary peasant masses, their shouts mimicking the communal hysteria of an earlier era. However, the rhetoric they use is that of capitalism—purchases, receipts, refunds. Li Yang uses the collectivist village's rape and purchase of Xuemei to expose a society struggling to adapt to a market system after a socialist education. The villagers invoke collective socialist might and capitalist logic at random—their ideological consistency hopelessly flawed. Both their socialist and capitalist arguments prevail over Xuemei's basic human rights.

Even education—the saving grace within *Blind Shaft*—is problematic in *Blind*

A hardened Xuemei cuts her hair, losing her innocence. She will now do anything to leave, including submitting to Degui.
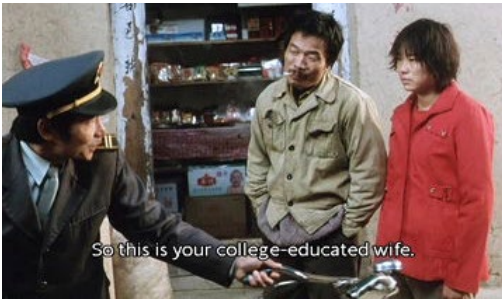
Yet, like Yuan in *Blind Mountain*, Xuemei is educated and focuses on reading. These films suggest education is one of the only saving graces in contemporary China. Degui, who lack redeeming characteristics, criticizes Xuemei, "You just read those stupid books! Feed the pigs!"

Mountain. The teacher, Decheng, is an ineffectual savior more intent on betraying his cousin Degui and using Xuemei for sex than in his job as a teacher. Xuemei asks Decheng if he enjoys teaching and Decheng retorts, "The pay is low and often late...It is meaningless." Xuemei also appears to be ambivalent about her education. She teaches village children but finds little satisfaction in teaching. Her education—which she gratefully describes in the first scene of the film—was not sufficient to save her from the plotting of the villagers, nor was her intelligence enough to plan a successful escape. Thus in *Blind Mountain*, there is no "togetherness" in family, education is not a saving grace, and humans regard themselves as commodities. It is an unrelenting view of a hypocritical and inconsistent society, wherein all overtures to the "homely interior" are conflicted and confused by the destructive "exterior" forces of a transitioning China.

Blind Mountain has been described as a lesser film than *Blind Shaft* due to its one-sided characterizations of the villagers and repetitious scenes. Li's film has been described as realistic and might be said to be an example of naturalism:

- he hired non-professional actors for most of the roles with the exception of the lead;
- actors speak naturally and in dialect;
- scenes are generally shot at eye level and hand-held;
- there is very little music.

However, despite these attempts at realism, the film succumbs to some of the simplistic binaries that Li avoided in *Blind Shaft*, such as rural/urban, uneducated/educated, and primitive/civilized—there is little attempt on the part of the filmmaker to humanize and complicate the villagers. Moreover, the tension of *Blind Shaft*—Song's changing morality and Yuan's potential spiritual "pollution"—is not present in *Blind Mountain*. The villagers do not change their positions, no one shows sympathy for Xuemei, and Xuemei herself never changes her point of view on the village. Therefore, without change or tension, the film lacks the drama, depth and moral ambiguity of *Blind Shaft*.

Conclusion

In making a film about the complicated positioning of rural workers in a transnational era, director Li Yang's own subject positioning is conflicted. On the one hand, Li is a German citizen with access to education and mobility decidedly unavailable to the subjects of his films. The funding and audience for his films are also both privileged and foreign. Despite distribution in China, his films are not well known outside of film and academic circles. On the other hand, Li is bringing the plight of marginalized populations to a wider, albeit elite/international, audience. Li seems genuinely concerned about the predicament of marginalized workers. The word "blind" in the films' titles asking audiences to pay attention and "see" the social issues involved. His films, with plots revolving around migration, criminality, and amorality, also stress the moral vacuum that has accompanied China's development.

In Li Yang's films, migrants are transfixed by the idea of the home/family, or *jia*. Yet, as Chow notes, these characters are depressingly and ironically trapped in a contemporary era marked by homelessness.[37] Throughout *Blind Shaft* and *Blind Mountain*, kinship/family is explored both in positive practices (the search for family, migration to support the family, education) and negative practices (kidnapping and rape to continue family lines; family members monetized).

Women, perhaps because they are symbolically associated with the concept of "home," are often victimized in these films. In that sense, the sentimental also revolves around the figure of a woman (as womb, as wife, as nation), who is for many of the male characters a perceived "key" to resolving the conflict between the exterior (globalization) and the interior (home/family). Thus, the attempt to find a "homely interiority" is divergent and messy during the globalization process—what can "family" mean in the midst of chaos?

Notes

1. This paper is partially based on research conducted as an MPhil candidate at Cambridge University. I would like to thank my advisors and the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies for their advice and mentorship. Also, I would like to thank Chuck Kleinhaus for his useful suggestions in revising. [return to page 1]

2. Zhao, Xiaohui and Jiang, Xueli. "Coal Mining: Most Deadly Job in China." *Xinhua* Nov 13 2004. [Online] <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2004-11/13/content_391242.htm>

3. Zhang, Li. *Strangers in the City: Reconfigurations of Space, Power and Social Networks within China's Floating Population*. Stanford University Press: Stanford (2001): 143.

4. Rofel, Lisa. *Other Modernities: Gendered Yearnings in China After Socialism*. University of California Press: Los Angeles (1999): 96. In this usage of the term modernity, Rofel refers to what she calls the "post-Mao imaginary of modernity" on page 217.

5. Rofel: 102.

6. Rofel: 103.

7. Rofel: 103.

8. Rofel: 97.

9. Yang, Xiushi. "Interconnections Among Gender, Work and Migration." *Re-Drawing Boundaries: Work, Households and Gender in China*. Ed. Entwisle, B and Henderson, G. University of California Press: Berkeley (2000): 197.

10. Jacka, Tamara. *Rural Women in Urban China: Gender, Migration and Social Change*. M.E. Sharpe, Inc: Armonk (2005): 247.

11. Sixth Generation and Urban Generation are both somewhat limited as labels. Sixth Generation tends to refer to directors who graduated from the Beijing Film Academy in the late 80's/early 90's and whose films focus on poverty, migration, and crime (Lou Ye, Wang Xiaoshuai, Jia Zhangke). This would exclude Li Yang (educated in Germany) and Ning Ying (educated at the BFA at the same time as the Fifth Generation, but her late start in filmmaking and focus on urban issues aligns her temporally and thematically with the

Sixth Generation). On the other hand, the term Urban Generation does not suggest films that take place outside of city spaces, like *Platform* (2000, d. Jia Zhangke) and Li Yang's films. Of the two, "Urban Generation" is perhaps more useful in describing the gritty contemporary dramas from the mid 1990's to the late 2000's.

12. Donald, Stephanie Hemelryk. *Public Secrets, Public Spaces: Cinema and Civility in China*. Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc: Boulder (2000): 121.

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19. Chow: 15.

20. Chow: 17.

21. Chow: 17.

22. Chow: 17-18.

23. Chow: 18.

24. Chow: 18.

25. Chow: 19.

26. Chow: 19.

27. Chow: 19-21.

28. Chow: 174.

29. Chow: 172.

30. Chow: 22.

31. In the case of Liu Qingbang's novel *Sacred Wood* (*Shenmu*), which this film is based on, this was the case, but Li Yang found it too trite for the film. See: Berry, Michael. *Speaking in Images*. Columbia University Press: New York (2005).

32. Berry. 222.

33. Berry: 226.

34. Note, on international DVD's the ending is different. Bai Xuemei stabs her husband in the final scene and whether or not she keeps her son is open to interpretation. [return to page 3]

35. Films with such characters include: *So Close to Paradise*, 1998, dir. Wang Xiaoshuai; *Blind Shaft*, 2003, dir. Li Yang; *The World*, 2004, dir. Jia Zhangke; *Luxury Car*, 2006, dir. Wang Chao.

35a. Hershatter, Gail. *Women in China's Long Twentieth Century*. University of California Press, 2007, p79.

36. Teng, Jinhua Emma. "The Construction of the 'Traditional Chinese Woman' in the Western Academy: A Critical Reading." *Signs* 22.1 (Autumn 1996): 143.

37. Chow: 178-179.

Images from *Manufactured Landscape* (2006, dir. Jennifer Baichwal).

The documentary features Edward Burtynsky's photo/video journal, mostly shot in China ...

... and captures the landscapes affected by globalization and industrialization.

Scrap metal dump.

Migrant workers, women, and China's modernization on screen

by Jenny Kwok Wah Lau

The story began thirty-some years ago. China opened up to a market economy in the late 70s and early 80s, and the rest of the world flooded in to take advantage of its vast resources, especially its human resources. As the country became more and more experienced in the workings of capitalism, its industrial capability evolved from largely low-skill, cheap product manufacturing to more high-end production. Just two decades later, by the turn of the century, China had been transformed into the "factory of the world," making everything from cheap plastic toys and electronic gadgets to brand-name fashions, high-tech solar panels, automobiles and much else. According to market reports, as of the mid 2000s China turned out 47% of the world's mobile phones,[1] 65% of the world's toys,[2] 70% of the world's digital cameras,[3] and 85% of the world's clocks.[4] [open endnotes in new window] China has been using so much power to manufacture everything for everyone that in July 2010 it became the top energy consumer in the world, displacing the United States from its century old dominance.[5] Beijing Automotive (BAIC) President, Wang Dazong, predicts that by 2020 China will manufacture half of the world's automobiles.[6] This is not a given, but what is true is that in 2010 China became the second largest economy in the world with so much cash in hand that it is now the biggest bondholder of the United States.

China's role as a new center of the global economy, with accompanying conspicuous consumption, is by now commonplace knowledge. Less acknowledged is how China's transformation from third world status to first world powerhouse is due, in no small measure, to the creation of an internal third world, largely composed of migrant workers who have moved from rural villages to large cities. These migrant workers provide the backbone for China's colossal industrialization. A prime example is Foxconn, one of the largest computer chip makers in the world; it supplies parts for such popular products as iPhone, iPad, Kindle, Xbox, Playstation, etc. In China Foxconn has over half million employees that work an average of 60-80 hours per week. Most of these workers are not local citizens of Shenzhen, where the companies' facilities are located. Out of its 400,000 strong workforce only 1 percent are local. Furthermore, the majority are female.[7] In Shenzhen almost 80 percent of the population consists of migrant workers and nearly 70 percent of these are women. The neighboring city of Dongguan, manufacturing a third of all shoes sold globally each year, has a population of over 7 million, more than two thirds of whom are migrant workers. [8]

Female migrant workers for the most part manufacture garments, toys, electronics, and housewares, or they work in the local service economy, such as in restaurants and hotels. Male migrants primarily do construction work. While many studies have been done on the subject of rural to urban migration

"most of them have been concerned with macro-level demographic,

One of the 13 full size towns flattened to make way for the Three Gorges Dam.

Workers eating in a factory cafeteria.

"The Real Toy Story."

economic, and political effects of migration, and with how the influx of migrants into urban areas should be managed."[9]

Relatively little attention has been paid to how migration is understood by the migrants themselves, especially how gender differences impact the migration circumstances and experiences of women.[10]

One of the hardships that specifically afflicts women migrants is the unavailability of maternity insurance. Once a female worker stops working due to pregnancy, she is cut off from the company's health coverage, if there is any. But she cannot enroll in the city unemployment system because she does not have resident status. So she is not entitled to receive maternity care. Another issue that young rural women confront is the community's censure when they seek work in the city. Rural people often expect women to marry in their hometown (countryside) and raise children there. Rural men face no such expectations. Or if a woman does get married, separating from her children may leave her with a strong sense of guilt due to the mother's traditional childrearing role.

It is well documented that working conditions in many factories are substandard. But over and beyond labor conditions, we must also consider the intense impact of industrialization on the natural and human environment and on the whole life-course of individuals, male and female. This paper will analyze how a number of photographic/video installations in the new millennium, together with documentary and narrative films made on the subject of migrant workers in past decades, reflect a new and disturbing visuality depicting conditions in modern China.

Photo/video installations

Images from "The Real Toy Story" installation by Michael Wolf.
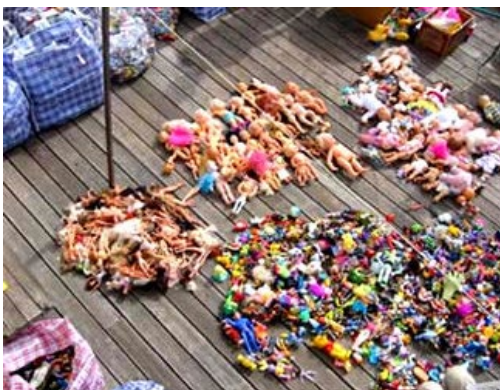
"The Real Toy Story" (John Batten Gallery, Hong Kong, 2004) was an installation of 20,000 plastic toys which visual artist Michael Wolf collected in California flea markets during a four-week trip. Amid the toys are portraits of factory workers. As can be seen, most of these workers are young females, who hand-produced thousands of identical toys. The massive amount of toys produced is astonishing while the machine-like monotonous life represented in the emotionless faces of the workers, is unsettling.

"Made in China" (2005) was at first a soloist exhibition of artist Melanie Jackson in Matt's Gallery, London. In 2006 a large-scale group exhibition of works on similar topics was mounted in the Museum of Contemporary Photography in Chicago with the same title. The show included, among others, Michael Wolf's "The Real Toy Story," Melanie Jackson's "Made in China," and photography by Edward Burtynsky, Danwen Xing, and Polly Braden. Many of these pictures/videos focus on female workers, their work and living environment.

Jackson's piece was a video installation made up of three short films composed of animation, staged film, and documentary footage about two Chinese women who migrate from their hometowns to distant cities. One woman, a farm girl, migrates to take a job in a cosmetic factory that makes eyelashes. The other, a musician, has migrated to England to study a traditional Chinese musical instrument, the Erhu.

Frame from animation in Melanie Jackson's "Made in China."

Film as shown in the installation.

Ironies of studying the Erhu in England.

Anyone moving from the country to the city faces an obvious level of cultural disruption. But the disruption is greatly intensified for a simple farm girl who is now making a decidedly unfamiliar product, fake eyelashes, whose utility no rural woman could have possibly imagined. Nor has she experienced the concept of

"beauty" that accompanies it. Similarly, going to the West to learn one of the most "Chinese" of musical instruments—to create one of the most traditional forms of Chinese art (music)—also presents a jarring juxtaposition. Such narratives candidly highlight the alienation and emotional dissonance that these women experience.

Also in this exhibition, well-known environmental photographer Edward Burtynsky's work examines the sweeping exploitation of nature engendered by China's gargantuan development. This exploitation has created attractive living conditions for a few and repulsive living conditions for the many.

Danweng Zing, "Picking Trash" and the labor of recycling electronic waste.

Danwing Xing, "disCONNEXION": piles of sorted trash from the electronics industry.

Danwen Xing's photographs show piles of electronic trash, obsolete computers, telephones, and stereos from Japan, South Korea, and the United States arriving along the coast of China's southern Province of Guangdong, where more than 100,000 workers make their living by sorting out trash for recycling or other purposes. Another photographer, Polly Braden documents the sojourn of a young girl, Ho Ping, as she moves from her hometown to a shoe factory in a city that produces for brands such as Nine West and Clarks, among others.

The environmental devastation and the hard life encountered by factory laborers were all poignantly expressed in these exhibits. Of equal importance, images of female migrant workers highlighted another set of issues. For example, following up on this earlier work, Polly Braden published a photographic essay titled "China

Between" (2007) with pictures of women that convey stories of social and cultural alienation. For example, one photo shows waitresses in a luxurious restaurant wearing elegant changshan (Chinese national attire) waiting nonchalantly around a stairway at the restaurant. The book emphasizes the palpable emotional disconnection between this kind of glamorous world of high society inside that restaurant and the dull life of migrant workers, who usually live by the edge of the city, the urban "backstage."

And yet, at the same time, incomes that migrant women workers gain, however measly, results in some fulfillment via increased consumptive power. Some of Polly Braden's photographs show migrant women shopping. These pictures complicate the questions surrounding the life of migrant workers. In what way do their lives deteriorate as a result of their migration? Do they experience lasting fulfillment? Are they hurt by migration or do they improve enough financialy so that their migration is ultimately beneficial to them?

Images from Polly Braden's "China Between."

Working at a fast food restaurant.

Staff gather for a pep talk at a seafood restaurant.
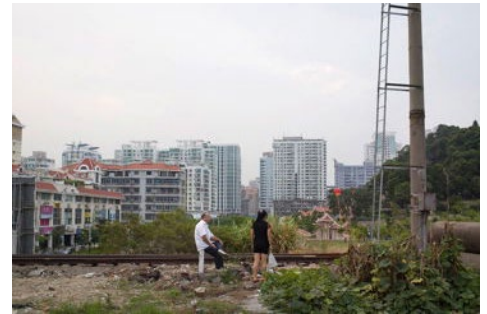
Sitting by the end of the railway line.

Street scene.

Supermarket shopping.

Documentary and narrative fiction films

Taking advantage of the narrative power of films, two documentaries made during the 2000s by filmmakers residing outside of China[11] present a more detailed description of the experience of migrant women.[12] The film *Up the Yangtze* (2007) by Yung Chang and *The Last Train Home* (2009) by Lixin Fan portray how women become migrant workers in order to support their families. These films have moved audiences worldwide with their heart-wrenching narratives and

stunning visuals.

Up the Yangtze relates a story of a personal struggle between an eldest daughter and her poverty-stricken family. The family lives in a half-paper, half-wood-board shed they built along the banks of the Yangtze River. Since the riverbank and the neighboring land will be flooded after the completion of each stage of the Three Gorges Dam the family has to keep moving in order to protect itself from the floodwaters. The eldest daughter is sent out to work against her will in order to support her family. She migrates from her rural home to work on a luxurious cruise ship, which takes Western (mostly U.S.) tourists on a "Three Gorges farewell trip." Coming from a poor family, she finds everything on the ship unfamiliar. She has little to no understanding of her environment. She experiences the pain of separation, alienation, and the loss of her dream of going to high school to have a better future. The film contrasts the poorest of the poor (many of the waitresses) with the money-seeking, Western-pleasing Chinese businessmen, and the fun-loving, innocent-seeming Western tourists.

Images from *Up the Yangtze*.

Cindy's home.

Inside Cindy's home. She leaves there to go to...

...work in a tourist boat. The family is so poor that they do not have luggage.
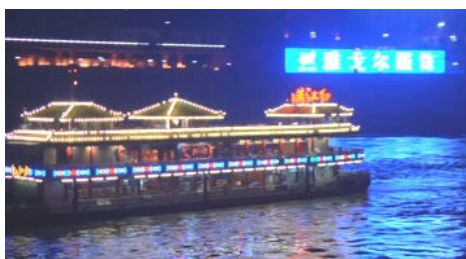
Luxurious boat where Cindy works.

The boat's interior.

Western tourists enjoying a Chinese banquet in the boat.

Cindy's job gives her financial ability to go shopping.

Cindy's family moves to avoid flooding.

The whole town is submerged.

In this way, the eldest girl of the family Yu Shui (Cindy) not only bears the brunt of a harsh environment but also endures the biases that derive from gender inequality. She is forced to make the kind of sacrifice that many other girls in China are asked to make, i.e. give up her education in order to make money to send her brother to school. (This common practice also enters the narrative in *Out of Phoenix Bridge*, which will be discussed below.) Sadly, Yu Shui's family faces such severe poverty that even her noble sacrifice cannot save them. As the dam project progresses, floods eventually wiped their small house from the riverbank. Nothing remains. The water drowns it all—the house, the girl's dream, and a better future.

The Last Train Home documents a heart-breaking story of a migrant couple, who like millions of other migrant workers, return home during Chinese New Year for a few days visit with the family. In this couple's case, there has been a ten-year protracted absence from their village, so their relationship with their children, especially with their daughter, has become estranged. Even though the daughter expresses anger at her parents because of understandable feelings of abandonment, the parents, especially the mother, are devastated by the daughter's rejection. During the New Year's Eve dinner, the parents' guilty feelings and the daughter's anger suddenly erupt into a shouting match and a fistfight.[13] At the end of the film, we find the daughter refusing to continue her schooling and leaving home. She travels to Southern China and finds a job in a nightclub, a job loaded with potential for sexual exploitation. Sadly, she herself becomes a new migrant worker, repeating the cycle in the tragedy of migration.

Images from *The Last Train Home.*

The protagonists are a couple working in a factory far away from home.

Jam-packed train station where millions of Chinese fight to board a train to go home for the New Year

Home in the village.

Frustrated daughter fights with her father.

Daughter leaves home, goes to a city and serves drinks in a night club.

Even though China's rural to urban migration continues to be one of the biggest human migrations ever to have taken place during peacetime history, very few fiction films, especially commercial narrative films, have been made about it. While numerous popular films have come out in the past two decades depicting the new modernized China either as a glorious success or as a "success" with human costs, not very many of them focus on migrant workers themselves.[14] Especially neglected are scripts about how this massive movement of capital and labor affect women's social position and lives. For example, the few popular fictional films that focus on migrant workers such as *Blind Shaft* and *Beijing Bicycle* deal mostly with male migrants. A rare popular film about a woman migrant and her child is *Loach is a Fish Too*. Unfortunately, the film is highly commercialized both in its story and production style and lacks the sociological depth required to depict a complicated migrant situation. On the other hand, world-renowned film director Jia Zhangke has made a number of films with more artistry and complexity that depict the effect of China's modernization on its people. Among them *The World* is most penetrating in exploring the problems and dilemmas of female migrant workers. As an artisan film, shown mostly in art cinemas, the film offers more insight into the world of migrants.

As powerful and well-made as some of these films are, most of them lack depth in presenting the range of women's issues. For example, many of the works listed above present migrant women as being a sign of social ills rather than agents of social change.[15] The scripts do not take up the subject position of the women characters; for example, the films do not examine whether female migrants choose to move to cities simply for financial reasons or perhaps because of other more personal agendas. In fact, recent research shows that women and men choose migration for different reasons. Most men migrate for financial reasons while many women migrate because they have an adventurous curiosity about the outside world.[16] Another question scripts could take up is what happens to migrant women once they go back to their home. Do they choose to return to the cities even though life there is so harsh? If yes, why? These important questions of women's subjectivity and agency, and how they might be represented in film, will be explored in more depth with the two films discussed below.

These two films about women migrants made by two female directors—one appearing in the late 90s and the other almost ten years later—represent a shift in the way filmmakers address issues of female migration. The 90s film, *Out of Phoenix Bridge* (1997), directed by Li Hong, is one of the first documentaries totally focused on migrant workers, in this case on women. The second film, *The Perfect Life* (2008), is a feature fiction film[17] directed by Emily Tang, with female migrants as the main protagonists.

Critics and scholars who write about China's films on migrant workers mostly focus on broad economic issues and the hardships suffered by urban workers. For example, Gina Marchetti's analysis of *Phoenix Bridge* praises the film for its critique of "the exploitation of Chinese women's labor in the global system" but criticizes it for its failure to "(condemn) globalization, and the dismantling of socialism."[18] However, in the process of re-examining some of these films, I have concluded that an exclusive critical attention to financial concerns can lead to downplaying other central themes. While the films' narratives obviously focus on economic issues, these two films are, in my opinion, first and foremost stories about women rather than stories about economics. The scripts detail what is expected of the protagonists as women as well as how they choose to live their lives. These two films reveal the powerful incentives beside money that lead women to choose to migrate. The films also demonstrate how the cycle of gender inequality in China continues regardless of economic development. Furthermore, as the stories of the two films take place during what could be considered two different stages of China's economic reform (*Phoenix* prior to the Tiananmen Square incidents of the 80s versus *Perfect Life* in the late 90s) they also represent very different responses to two important historical moments.

Out of Phoenix Bridge

The women live in a highly compressed space.

The slum area where the women live.

Xaizi and her friends go shopping for the first time.

Out of Phoenix Bridge is a documentary about four female migrant workers (Xiazi, Afeng, Jailing, and Xiao Wang) from a small village called Phoenix Bridge in Anhui (a poor province in southeastern China) who come to Beijing looking for low-skill manual jobs as housemaids and street vendors. These jobs, although low-paying by city standards, already compensate ten-fold over what is possible in Anhui. The verite style reveals in detail how these women manage their lives in highly compressed spaces. The narration, which comes from the director's own diary, describes how even taking a bath in the living quarters requires a laborious maneuver because of the lack of space and facilities. Throughout, the film uses several such verbal vignettes to indirectly reveal the women's material and social condition.

The women spend most of their waking time working. From their conversation, we learn how harsh their working conditions are. Life in the big city is not as desirable as they expected. When the filmmaker discovers that these women do not know anyone in Beijing other than their landlord and have never toured the city even after a whole year of living there, she takes them out to visit Tiananmen Square. But even this kind invitation is accepted with suspicion, indicating their unfamiliarity with the wider world and strong insecurity with "strangers." In metropolitan Beijing they live a life completely alienated from their urban hosts. The filmmaker, a Beijing native, admits she'd never been aware that such a congregation of migrants lived only 50 meters outside of the city.

Unlike other films about migrants, *Phoenix* moves quickly from a focus on the hardship of migrant living to the women's personal histories. First, they talk about their lack of schooling in their native villages. Afeng and Jailing say their parents did not allow them to go to school because they were girls. Afeng describes one incident when she tried to go to school only to have her parents physically stop her. First, her father grabbed her as she left home. When she attempted to circumvent the parents by taking a detour around a river, her mother blocked her. Sadly such a description of women (mothers) helping to reinforce discrimination against girls is repeated further along in the film.

In another conversation on family matters, Xiao Wang and Afeng talk about wife beatings and other forms of violence in their homes and among their relatives. They also describe an educated woman in their village, rejected for her independent mind. All the men avoided her. All four women have a common memory of family life that is one of human (rather than economic) suffering. Women's desires and opportunities in such a pre-modern, rural setting are shown as either blocked or controlled by the men and women surrounding the young women.

But the rebellious Xiazi challenges this control. Her strong and independent character enables her to resist her domineering parents, especially in matters of career and marriage. She opposes rural restrictions, sexual repression, and provincial boredom. When the filmmaker follows her to her hometown and meets her mother, the audience is led to a surprising realization—mother and daughter actually share similar thoughts. In the film, during much of this visit, the mother laments hardships she has endured as a wife and a mother. She was mistreated in her first marriage and she believes that she would not have had to marry a second time were it not for her children. She also thinks she would have had a better economic life if she had never married at all. Even so, she insists her daughter

A slum area in Beijing where migrant workers live.

pursue a similar traditional marriage, lived in submission to her husband. So while the mother's story is sad, her subjectivity, as a product of different social institutions, is contradictory. The bitter cycle of gender inequality gets reinforced from one generation to another, from one economic situation to another. Women themselves can perpetuate the oppression of women via their subjugation to an oppressive tradition.

Xiazi's stepfather expresses a great deal of anger toward her because she rejects his authority. He has nothing good to say about her. He owns a barbershop which functions like a gossip mill. There rural folks gather to speak poorly about girls who go to work in the city, saying how greedy, sexually loose, etc. they are. The villagers' inconsistency and hypocrisy is apparent when one realizes that some of these gossipers probably receive money sent back by their girls—just like the four women in the film who send most of their money home in spite of the bad treatment they get from their parents. Similar to many other underdeveloped regions of the world, this village benefits from the economic input of women working in urban areas far from home. But even though these women's hardship makes possible the primitive accumulation of capital in their home village (which is, after all, the source of capitalist success), their contribution is ignored, denied, and even chastized by their communities—when in reality these courageous women should be championed as heroines. Their history of sacrifice is erased. In its place, a group of mostly men, with Xiazi's father as one of the opinion leaders, initiate and control a discourse of sour criticism against female villagers.

Phoenix Bridge village.

A wedding procession in the village.

Xiazi's stepfather badmouthing her.

Xiazi's stepfather's barbershop.

Unlike her mother, Xiazi lives in an unique socio-historical moment which allows her to reject an oppressive tradition and renegotiate a different kind of social relationship and identity. Throughout the film her desire for autonomy and respect is made possible to a certain extent because of the economic opportunities offered by the new capitalist system.

For example, the four women are clearly happy when the filmmaker takes them on their first shopping trip. It is the first time that the audience sees a smile on their faces. Their consumptive power definitely has some positive effects. That these new consumers savor their power to choose is seen in the way they measure themselves in front of the mirror as they try on their new sweaters. This is so even though in other more important issues they have no choice. That is, their resident status in the city is determined by the political system; their marriage can still be determined by their families if they go back home; or their vocation, if any, is determined by an economic system beyond their comprehension. In contrast, this small power to consume seems to give some of them the hope for further improvement. However, the audience will soon discover that consumptive choice is not the only freedom that Xiazi pursues.

Xiazi returns home for a possible wedding.

Xiazi's mother thinks she should live a life like hers.

Xiazi tries to work in a factory near home.
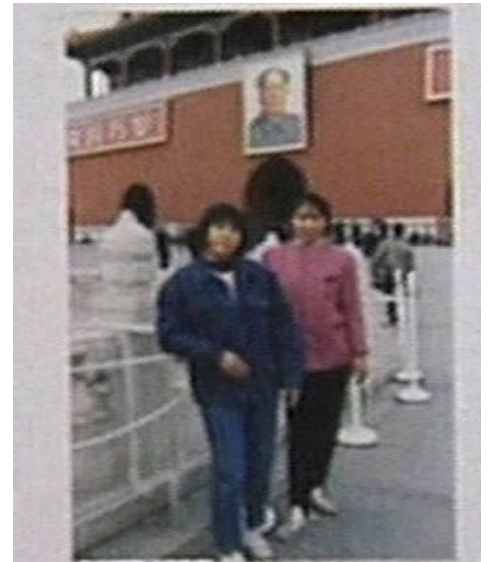
A picture of Xiazi and Jailing taken by the filmmaker when she took them out to visit Tiananmen Square.

Despite the almost intolerable hardship of working in Beijing, one thing that keeps women like Xiazi coming back is that there at least she can gain some control over her own life. Economic reform brought forth by the capitalist system makes it possible for women to relocate, a move that gives them hope to overcome economic

hardship and cross-generational gender oppression. Their optimism represents the lingering traces of the optimism of the larger society generated during Deng Xiaoping's era of economic reform.[19] [open endnotes in new window] Deng's policy of "Reform and Openness," labeled by Chinese intellectuals as the "New Era" (also the "Culture Fever" era), generated not only an openness to the then new capitalist system but also an openness in regards to many other aspects of society. As such, even though for many Chinese substantial economic improvement had not yet occurred, changes in ideology, lifestyle, values, and worldview were already manifesting themselves. For Xiazi, and to a certain extent the filmmaker herself, hope to overcome pre-modern rural conservatism and inequality via the modernization process kept her optimistic. It ensured her return to the city.

A Perfect Life

The second film, *A Perfect Life,* has two protagonists —Li Yieying and Jenny Tse. They seek a better life by migrating to the industrial/commercial centers of Southern China—Shenzhen and Hong Kong. This film can be read almost as a sequel to Xiazi's story. She could just as well be one of the two women. While *Phoenix Bridge* has the cultural ethos of the Reform Era, *Perfect Life*'s story corresponds to the new centennial. This is the era of Jiang Zemin (1993-2003). When the film begins, Li, a woman from Shenyang (an industrial city in northeast China), is trying hard to move out of her hometown. She attempts to join a performing arts group but is not good enough at playing the music they need. During her audition, the leaders of the group can hardly recognize the western music she plays. Li seems to represent a different type of migrant woman, who so far has not been portrayed in most other films.

Images from *A Perfect Life*

Li working in a factory, a life that bores her.

She has a factory job, but money does not seem her primary or exclusive concern. She is curious and adventurous. She attempts to learn English in order to give herself a chance to move out of her environment. She tries a few small jobs but is not happy with them. People in her town are provincial. They are not kind, including her mother, who is relentlessly angery at her. Visually the town space is dull, backward, dirty and cluttered with dilapidated buildings. Li wants to find new experiences and explore new places. In fact, such character motivation actually is consistent with research which found that over half of migrant women have "(gaining) more experience in life" as their incentive for mobility versus almost all male workers who put money as their primary goal.[20]

Li finally lands a promising job as a cleaning maid in a mid-level hotel, which provides a more upscale world with modern media gadgets. She exhibits much curiosity about the guests. After all, a hotel offers the opportunity to meet travelers with diverse backgrounds. She has a short-lived romance with hotel guest, Brother Wang, who ends up asking her to deliver a parcel to Shenzhen. This fits her desire to move away so she makes it a one-way trip. Yet that's not the end of her journey. When the film concludes, the audience learns that Li has managed to find a Shenzhen grocery store owner to marry. But then one scene later she is seen running away from her newlywed husband with a married businessman from Hong Kong**.**

Li lives in a dilapidated town.
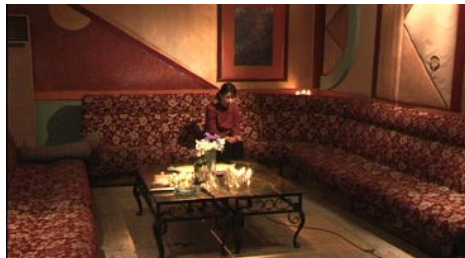
A mid-level hotel that provides a certain upscale environment.

Li sneakily tries on wardrobe she finds in hotel guest's room.
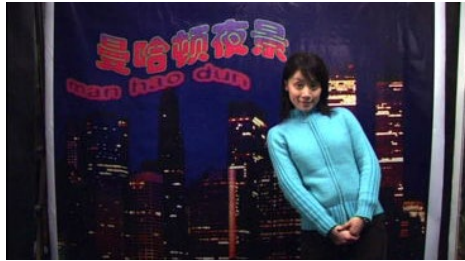
Li poses in front of a poster for a photo (to celebrate her own birthday). The Chinese character labels the scene as Manhattan. But neither she nor the studio photographer know where Manhattan is.

Li is hotel guest Wong's object of interest.

Li is constantly moving and searching for something better or something more satisfying. But it seems that she can't really find it. Even the last trip that she embarks on, the trip to Shenzhen, does not seem to bring her happiness. Unlike the better-off men she meets, such as Brother Wang, or her grocery store owner husband, or the Hong Kong businessman with whom she elopes, Li has no financial success. It seems that she is driven by her desire to "see the new," which she achieves not so much by her hard work but by her romantic relations with the men who pursue her.

Li's story of moving/drifting away is contrasted with the story of another woman—Jenny. Jenny moved from mainland China and has settled in Hong Kong for over 12 years, where she married a Hong Kong man (we can guess he is a Hong Kong person by his Cantonese). In the beginning of the film Jenny is in the process of a hostile divorce.

Hong Kong—the city that Jenny migrated to.

Parallel editing accentuates the fact that Li and Jenny do not know each other. They lead separate and unconnected lives. While Li is trying to move south, further away from heartland China, Jenny will eventually move north, back to Shenzhen. While Li is trying to get into a relationship/connection with Hong Kong, Jenny is trying to get out of it. Jenny's conflict-ridden marital failure brings back memories of the mainland. In various scenes, photographs of Jenny remind her of her friends back home. She ruminates on the materially simple but happy and innocent life there. At the end of the film Jenny finalizes her divorce. Unable to find a job in Hong Kong she moves back to Shenzhen, where she finds herself, so to speak, "back to square one."

Jenny signs her divorce papers.

New economic opportunities have not really benefitted Li and Jenny very much. They work hard. They move out of their hometown and try hard. But that does not help them move up the economic ladder. Their search for a piece of "success," be it money or new experiences, does not seem to go anywhere. Their short moments of minor success are largely dependent on their relationships with men. Even though the economic development of China from the late 90s to the new millennium was astronomical, and many men achieved success, the life trajectory of these two women has not improved proportionally. The strength of *Perfect Life* lies in its ability to capture the mood of these women, whose effort is akin to treadmill running. Their constant attempts to achieve some degree of self-fulfillment cannot come to fruition.

Jenny at home fighting with her ex-husband over the phone.

Jenny and her two children in Hong Kong.

At the film's end, Jenny randomly joins an amateur street dancing group to enjoy a moment of relief. But her life is going nowhere.

Li took a picture of herself with her wedding picture before eloping with a Hong Kong businessman.

After a decade of Jiang Zemin's consolidation of capitalist practice, the contradictions created by socialist capitalism become more apparent. Previous optimism from Deng's New Era about the positive, liberating power of the new economic order has been replaced by doubt, anxiety, and uncertainty. People realize that the change that will bring in the "bright socialist future" will not come without considerable sacrifice—personal and/or social. Many Chinese intellectuals and international China scholars have described this period as the "Post New-Era." It is marked by the centrality of the market in China's social life, fading of ideology, isolation of the individual, fragmentation of society, and rupture of the social fabric.

The story of *Perfect Life* is situated at this moment when the globalized commercial society and commodity fetishism are already a given (as shown in the scenes in the mid-level hotel, the city of Hong Kong, and Shenzhen). Material excess is more obvious in this film than in *Phoenix Bridge* even though the situation for the women in *Perfect Life* remains even bleaker. Both women remain alienated from the new society, which does not provide meaningful entry for their participation. While Li continues to pursue the new capitalist imaginary (travel, new environment, luxuries), Jenny has proven these fantasies to be illusionary. Both women remain uncertain if not disappointed in their pursuit of fulfillment, even while the wealthy (men) surrounding them become wealthier and more well-traveled.

Thirty years of modernization clearly has not diminished pre-modern gender inequality. Furthermore, in the Post New-Era, women face an added danger of being left behind. Neither film gives any resolution for these searching women. For them there are only sideways movements from one point to another. It is important to see how these two films, directed by women, bring up significant aspects of migrant women's experiences that are not so carefully explored in other films—especially women's dreams and desires for themselves.

Go to Notes page

Notes

1. http://www.eetasia.com/ART_8800461340_499488_NT_6db2a622.HTM
[return to page 1 of essay]

2. http://www.researchinchina.com/Htmls/Report/2010/5923.html

3. http://www.scribd.com/doc/72690303/Global-and-China-Digital-Still-Camera-DSC-Industry- report-2011

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7. Bianca Bosker. "Foxconn Factory's Violations: iPad Factory Workers' Grievances Detailed in Report." In *The Huffington Post*. March 29, 2012. See http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/03/29/foxconn-factory-violations_n_1389664.html

8. Sally Kincaid. "China's Migrant Women" in Perspective Column. *Socialist Review*. Jan. 2012. See http://www.socialistreview.org.uk/article.php?articlenumber=11875

9. Arianne Gaetano and Tamara Jacka. *On the Move: Women in Rural-to-Urban Migration in Contemporary China*. NY: Columbia University Press. p. 2.

10. ibid.

11. I chose films made by filmmakers outside of China because many films critical of China's migrant situation made by filmmakers inside of China are banned and thus not easily available for study.

12. A third documentary *Manufactured Landscape* (2006) by Jennifer Baichwal, although not focusing on women migrants, is another important film by a filmmaker outside of China on the subject of modernization. It features Edward Burtynsky's photo/video journal, mostly shot in China, and captures the landscapes affected by globalization and industrialization.

13. The producer indicated to me after a public screening of the film at Stanford University in 2010 that the cameraperson felt morally obliged to stop his camera during the fight and mediate the family dispute.

14. In the over 400 page China Film Annual Reports 2010, which covers both industrial and art/cultural films made that year, migrant workers were mentioned only tangentially.

15. A similar comment was made by anthropologist Arianne Gaetano. "Rural Woman and Modernity in Globalizing China: Seeing Jia Zhangke's *The World"* in *Visual Anthropology Review* Volume 25, Issue 1, pages 25–39, Spring 2009.

16. Arianne Gaetano and Tamara Jacka. *On the Move: Women in Rural-to-Urban Migration in Contemporary China*. NY: Columbia University Press, 2004. p. 2.

17. I would even say it is an experimental narrative film as its narrative structure is unconventional in the sense that it is a mixture of a fictional story with a documentary film. The film was shot on digital camera and won the first prize in Vancouver film Festival, 2009 and Hong Kong International Film Festival (digital film section), 2009.

18. Marchetti, Gina. *From Tiananmen Square to Times Square: Transnational China and the Chinese Diaspora on Global Screens, 1989-1997*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press. 2006. p. 88.

19. Although the film is made a few years after Deng retired from his leadership position, the ethos of his period still lingered on. [return to page 2]

20. See footnote no. 16.

Warmth emanates from the restaurant in *Don't Go Breaking My Heart* …

… while bare tables and cold lighting surround the gangsters in *The Mission.*

Defining the popular auteur, or what it means to be human within the machine

review by Caroline Guo

Director in Action: Johnnie To and the Hong Kong Action Film by Stephen Teo (Hong Kong University Press, 2007). 294 pages.

- INT. SHOPPING CENTER – HONG KONG KOWLOON DISTRICT
  To the rhythmic pulsating of electronic music, a shootout takes place between rival triad members. Movement remains minimal, gunshots sparse; the gangsters depart in stoic silence.

- INT. RESTAURANT – SUZHOU, CHINA
  A lyrical violin solo plays as a skyscraper lights up with hearts and the words "MARRY ME." A man bends down on one knee; the woman tears up, torn between him and the thought of another man, but she finally accepts. Applause and smiles from surrounding onlookers ensue.

The stoic entrance of *The Mission* gangsters ...

... indicates To's stylized stationing of characters in his gangster films.

In a very different mise en scene, a skyscraper lights up with a romantic request in *Don't Go Breaking My Heart* ...

... which has a happy outcome for the emotional couple.

Juxtaposed side by side, the two scenes appear to have nothing in common. However, they both make up Hong Kong director Johnnie To's repertoire, with the former taking place in his critically acclaimed action film *The Mission* (1999) and the latter in his recent romantic comedy *Don't Go Breaking My Heart* (2011).

Stephen Teo's book *Director in Action: Johnnie To and the Hong Kong Action Film* follows To's works up to 2007 (*Exiled*), celebrating the filmmaker as an auteur

Hearts abound in conventional representations...

... of sugary sweet, romcom love.

Perhaps the only trace of To's earlier blood-filled action works, now safely contained in buckets of red paint.

Inaction-within-action: To's idiosyncracy emerges through careful positioning ...

and offering detailed analyses on his ability to modify generic standards. While To's contemporaries such as John Woo and Tsui Hark have long been hailed as auteurs, Teo claims that To has often been unjustly overlooked. As a result, Teo contends throughout the book that To is largely responsible for rejuvenating the Hong Kong action genre with his personal, idiosyncratic contribution, creating films that transgress conventions and defy clear-cut classification.

At the same time, no trace of the stylistic panache and fatalism in *The Mission* remains in the feel-good romcom *Don't Go*; gone are the references to his native Hong Kong—even the location shifts from Hong Kong to mainland China and the language from Cantonese to Mandarin. It would appear to be the logical route to go, as romantic comedies are much more likely than action films to secure mainland funding and reel in large audiences, thus proving more profitable vis-à-vis the People's Republic of China. In effect, *Don't Go* grossed nearly 10 million yuan in China on its opening day and heralded To's biggest box office opening to date.[1] [open endnotes in new window] It seems that in more recent years,To has increasingly looked to reach mainstream, international audiences in order to maximize economic profit (with his most recent 2012 theatrical release *Romancing in Thin Air* also featuring a romantic storyline).

What does it actually mean, then, to be an auteur, especially in terms of a filmmaker working within the generic systems of popular cinema? And would the turn to a romantic comedy such as *Don't Go,* which deviates from his overall reputation as an action director, somehow diminish Teo's claims of To as a stand-out auteur of Hong Kong cinema? I intend to explore these questions with respect to not only Teo's assertions supporting To's particular auteurism but also his definition of the *auteur*, and especially the popular auteur.

The figure of the auteur was famously raised in François Truffaut's 1954 manifesto in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, in which he recognized filmmakers such as Robert Bresson and Jean Renoir as true "men of the cinema"—ones who had the audacity to raise film to an art form (39). Individual filmmakers are thus singled out as artists exercising distinct world views and seeking to challenge the standing conventions of filmmaking.[2] While Teo partly follows in the vein of classical auteur theory by distinguishing To's unique stylistic trademarks that challenge the norms of the Hong Kong action genre, he takes a more relational approach in contemplating the auteur. That is to say, he argues that To's auteurism is one that thrives within the constraints of genre cinema; necessitates collaboration with other producers, directors, and writers; and straddles the line between generic standards and personal style.

In fact, as Teo claims, To's identity as an auteur only becomes evident when his films are considered within the overarching framework of genre cinema. For instance, the static positioning in the aforementioned scene in *The Mission* proves remarkable when viewed with respect to a larger body of Hong Kong action films. Teo explains:

> "The inaction-within-action principle has a relevance which can only be appreciated when we pitch it against the maxim of speed and fast-paced action that is standard practice in the Hong Kong cinema" (119).

Teo thus implies that any analysis of To's specificity must include an understanding of the wider context of Hong Kong genre cinema: auteur and genre do not only inform each other, but also must be contemplated with respect to one another. As a result, I find that one of the most striking implications of Teo's book is the contemplation of popular auteurism—or the attempt to situate where the auteur

stands amidst the systems of industry and genre.

The cinema/destiny-machine

In his article titled "The Auteur Theory Reexamined," Donald E. Staples in *Cinema Journal* (1966) claims:

> "In film…the artistic variables are so numerous and so constantly changing from one production to the other that it is difficult to establish a one-to-one ratio and discover who the auteur of any film really is" (4).

Films (especially industry productions) are inevitably group creations, involving an assembly line of roles that includes not only those making the film but also those in marketing, exhibition, distribution—potentially implicating the industry as a whole. Consequently, Staples's statement suggests that the finished product should be attributed more to the exchanges between these groups than to the input of any one individual.

The ever-present Milkyway company logo opens To's films.

In effect, Teo emphasizes the importance of To's founding of the Milkyway production company in 1996 and his role as the "creative producer" and "nucleus" alongside groups of writers, directors, and producers (67). In conjunction with other filmmakers (Wai Ka-Fai, John Woo, and Patrick Leung for example), To began to create his more notable works, or what Teo calls "line of products," which better connotes the economic and mechanical aspects of filmmaking (67). As the word "nucleus" also suggests the existence of a constellation of forces surrounding the nucleus and feeding off one another, this term seems to signify the importance of collaboration in To's films. The influence from other filmmakers is undeniable; hence, while To may function as the engine jump-starting the creative process, the look of the resulting product comes from the efforts of a larger machine at work.

The gangsters of *Sparrow* are (literally) broken by the trappings of their inner circle.

However, while acknowledging the importance of the Milkyway company, Teo looks to distinguish To as the principal figure, or the auteur at the head of these productions. Although To is often credited as an associate director or producer and sometimes not credited at all, Teo claims that he actually played a leading role in most of the productions, proving his auteur status. Apparently, as the "creative nucleus," To is described as the main individual responsible for both upholding the company's reputation of originality and developing the films' distinct style and themes.

Tellingly, this tension between the presence of the "machine" (the company) and the figure of the human individual (To) emerges throughout the book—not only in describing the workings of the Milkyway company and Hong Kong film industry, but also in analyzing one of To's major thematic threads. In tracing his films over time, Teo claims that one of the themes prevalent throughout is the conflict between individuals and reigning societal structures:

The Destiny-machine strikes again as the system pierces the flesh of a character in *Sparrow*.

> "[F]ate in To's films is akin to the "Destiny-machine", a term employed by Tom Gunning to refer to 'larger, impersonal and often sinister systems' bearing down on the characters" (11).

The idea of the "Destiny-machine" thus refers to the impossibility of escaping one's fate, as characters in To's films are frequently enclosed within fatalistic circles and circumstances. Furthermore, these circumstances are often pre-prescribed systems condemning individuals to their destinies, such as triad laws, police duties, and firefighter obligations. Although these systems have been set into place and enforced by their human agents, they have grown too powerful for mere individuals to confront, ultimately determining said individuals' actions.

The Destiny-machine emerges in the form of a drill piercing human flesh in one of To's earliest films *The Big Heat* (1988).

Epitome of the Destiny-machine, the system shapes and takes its toll on the individual.

This eternal struggle against the Destiny-machine resonates with the bigger struggle outlined in Teo's book, which is the position of the auteur working within the institutions and codes of the production company, industry, and genre. Constantly vacillating between mastery and loss of control, autonomy and dependency, both the fictional onscreen characters and off-screen filmmakers appear to find themselves defined by systems that surpass them in scale.

Teo's book vacillates between extremes as well, as he initially declares To as an "outsider who doesn't quite fit into the scheme of things" (25) yet concedes by the end:

> "[To] is experimental as a result of working within the system of genre cinema and the industry which produces it. He does not work outside of the system and probably would not be able to function if he did" (210).

The *Mad Detective's* unstable character is seen in close-up, a possible reference to van Gogh's self-destructive yet vibrant artistry.

Evidently, there remains a certain tension between acknowledging To's interaction with other filmmakers while aiming to prove him as the leading creative force, and between considering him a product of the system while demonstrating his defiance of this very system.

At the same time, I find that such contradictions prove conducive in demonstrating the difficulty of clearly defining the popular auteur entrenched in the commercial and industrial machine of genre cinema. Perhaps, then, it is this very ambivalence that best characterizes the notion of "Johnnie To the auteur," as he ultimately exists as a stand-in for an amalgam of filmmaking facets rather than as a single director exercising his personal voice. Teo states:

> "In referring to To as the auteur, I mean that he encompasses a variety of roles and egos: he possesses the egoistic elements of the writer, for example (in his case, he has a team of writers working to his specifications); he controls the actors and the director of photography; directs the production designer, determines the set-ups and the *mise-en-scène*; and, as producer, has final cut on most of his pictures' (14).

The mad detective falls victim to his own genius and insanity.

Beyond just "encompassing" these roles, I would argue that To's auteurism is also based in *representing* these roles: meaning, the extent to which he is personally responsible for all of these aspects of filmmaking may remain debatable, but what is significant is that he has come to embody the delivery of these tasks.

As a result, the contradictions and multiplicity that make up Teo's analyses of To's auteurism signal the popular auteur as an individual who stands as a figurehead for the various parts and gears involved in the filmmaking process—a process, in the case of To's Milkyway company, concerned with creating products that follow expectations of certain genres yet manage to differentiate themselves in the

Shifting identities: gangsters' onscreen

Taking off the edge, the feel-good genre of romantic comedy is announced in the title images of *Don't Go Breaking My Heart*.

In *Don't Go Breaking My Heart*, moving away from male gangsters, the central female character and her strengths are highlighted.

marketplace. Thus, To's auteurism does not only imply coexisting with production procedures, popular generic systems, and conditions of the Hong Kong film industry, but also coalescing with such factors.

Unevenness and the flaw of being human

Upon viewing To's most recent, romantic works, it would seem that he has moved on from being one of the key auteurs of Hong Kong action cinema (*Exiled*, the last film Teo analyzes, is an action film and also features much of the "inaction-within-action principle" showcased in *The Mission*.) However, Teo argues that signs of unevenness and inconsistency should be regarded as virtues and essential components of auteurship: for Teo, unevenness reflects the filmmaker's ability to dabble in diverse genres and styles, displaying a constant, unpredictable evolution. After all, *Don't Go* isn't the first time that To has forayed into romantic comedy (the first being *Needing You* in 2000), and the fact that he has explored (is exploring, and most likely will still explore) such a wide range of genres should be celebrated instead of condemned.

Furthermore, while *The Mission* couldn't appear more different from *Don't Go* in terms of genre, style, and cast (the former is male-dominated while the latter features a female protagonist), there remains an underlying theme tying them together, which is the destabilizing potential of human flaw and weakness. In *The Mission*, the youngest member of the gang makes the mistake of sleeping with the boss's wife, which breaks down the bonds of the tight-knit group; in *Don't Go*, the "other" man's sexual capriciousness and violent impulses disturb the woman's more secure, stable relationship with her eventual fiancé.

Don't Go Breaking My Heart: The third man's inability to control his sexual impulses leads to heartache and his downfall.

Less than picture-perfect? Three's a crowd as the couple waves to the third man.

Some things never change: questioning ...

...and acknowledging the flaw of being human.

Also, in other films made after the publication of Teo's book, the protagonists continue to display similar tendencies: in *Sparrow* (2008), the gang members find themselves both physically and emotionally weakened by the charms of a pretty woman working for the rival gang, and in *Mad Detective* (2007), the genius investigator who ends up cracking the case through his quirky methods also falls victim to his own mental instability.

Teo points out that this theme of "flawed humanity" constantly runs alongside that of the Destiny-machine, eventually undermining the smooth running of a given system (55). Indeed, flaws are frequently highlighted—not necessarily as negative attributes, but instead as sources of diversion and entertainment. For example, the youngest gangster's seduction of the boss's wife in *The Mission* forces a suspenseful
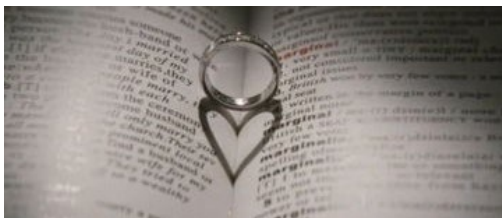
Fairytale-like endings in To's romantic comedies seem a far cry from the action films' macho fatalism.

Romance and sunny dispositions ...
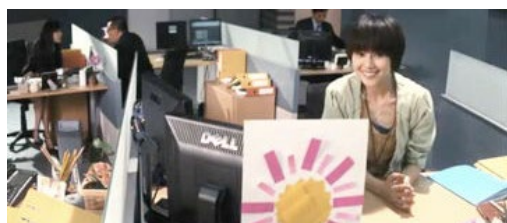
… indicate genres and grounds To might further explore.

Not going without a fight…have To's action films really ended?

rift within the gang, and the third man's intrusive behavior in *Don't Go* manages to keep the couple from becoming too picture-perfect.

And, like the Destiny machine, the presence of such flawed humanity could apply to the individuals both onscreen and off: even when To appears to be inconsistent, he is continually expanding on his current body of work and, most importantly, providing us with more varied forms of entertainment. Furthermore, especially with a film like *Don't Go* that is centered on the heartbreaks of a female character and features a fairytale "happily ever after" ending, To breaks from his reputation as a macho, fatalistic filmmaker.

In fact, such "breaks" have always been occurring throughout To's career: he showcased a female character as a central protagonist in his 2008 film *Sparrow* and his earlier *Heroic Trio* (1993) boasted an all-female fighting trio. As Teo succinctly concludes, "[t]he function of the auteur is to be unpredictable" (208). Difficult to tell what direction he will head next, To and his Milkyway company's constant shifting allows for a dynamic exploration of the cracks within the system. That is to say, while each genre may pose constraints, it is the combination of roles and genres—the "and"—that defines To's multi-faceted auteurism: writer *and* director *and* producer of commercial *and* art-house *and* action *and* melodrama *and* romance *and* comedy *and...*?

This lingering *and*—this hint of future fluctuation and discovery—proves worthy of further examination if we continue in the direction of Teo's study of To's role as popular auteur. If no longer predominantly an auteur of Hong Kong action cinema, perhaps a more detailed study of his recent forays into romantic genres should follow. The potential for flaw and inconsistency thus becomes a quality not to be dismissed but instead foregrounded as the telltale sign of the director in action—a director who might function as an engine, but not one without a heartbeat.

Go to notes page

To top   Print version   JC 54   *Jump Cut* home

Notes

1. Figures reported in Grace Li's article "*Don't Go Breaking My Heart* opened to box office success," *Asia Pacific Arts* (04 May 2011), http://asiapacificarts.usc.edu/article@apa?dont_go_breaking_my_heart_opened_to_box_office_success_16604.aspx. [return to page 1 of essay]

2. See John Hess's explanation of Truffaut's manifesto in "*La politique des auteurs*, part 2: Truffaut's manifesto," *Jump Cut*, no. 2 (1974): 20-22.

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Truffaut, François. "Une Certaine Tendance du Cinéma Français." *Cahiers du Cinéma* no. 31 (January 1954): 15-29.

Haiping, in tears, complains to her husband, Su Chun, that her little daughter sees her as a stranger because they sent the daughter to live with her grandmother.

Haizao meets the Party official, Song Siming, at a business dinner and later becomes his mistress for the sake of financial assistance.

Song Siming is attracted to Haizao at the business dinner.

Negotiating censorship: *Narrow Dwelling* as social critique

by Wing Shan Ho

Narrow Dwelling as a national concern

Chinese television is an emergent but still understudied field. Current research has examined Chinese television in the contexts of globalization, transnational flow, and regionalization, and has discussed the issues of democratization, commercialization, audience reception, form and content, and even the social space that television occupies.[1] [open endnotes in new window] Particular concern has centered on the amount of "freedom" that television programs enjoy and the level of public participation in these programs. These issues remain of interest because television production is historically and still currently conceived as situated somewhere between propaganda and commercialization, even though the Chinese government continues to deepen its economic reform (Di 2011; Yin 2002; Berry 2009).

To further understand the ideological contestation taking place through television programs and television's role in the everyday lives of Chinese citizens, this paper examines negotiations between television dramas and censorship. Censorship policy is one of the Chinese state's regulating forces in controlling what the state desires or tolerates for its people to see. In the last quarter century, the demand for and popularity of television drama has increased thirty-fold. Production has increased from fewer than 500 television drama episodes in 1983 (Guo 1991, 149) to nearly 15,000 in 2007 (Guojia guangbo dianshi zongju 2007, 285) and drama has become a core component of television consumption for "the world's biggest audience" (Curtin 2007).

In order to demonstrate the nuanced interactions between the state's power structure at work behind television production and the (im)possibility of exercising control over cultural products, this paper investigates the narrative complexity of the television drama *Narrow Dwelling* (2009), a thirty-five episode television serial broadcast Mondays through Fridays. Each episode of *Narrow Dwelling* is betwen forty to forty five minutes with three commercial breaks, with a daily air time of an hour.[2]

To critique government corruption implicitly and thus obtain a shooting permit, *Narrow Dwelling* has deployed an artful narrative structure in which women characters serve as active agents seeking to acquire an apartment—a structure that will be detailed below. The drama also faithfully adapts the concerns voiced about women's issues that were in the original work upon which *Narrow Dwelling* is based. This paper also discusses a variety of official and citizens' responses to the show in order to develop an understanding of the ways the state interacts with critical television dramas and the ways common people interact with a (self-)

Grandma Li refuses to relocate, explaining to her old neighbors that the social injustice of urban renewal forces local residents to leave their downtown community and move to inconvenient suburbs.

censored product such as *Narrow Dwelling*. In doing so, it demonstrates the state's flexible and reproductive power structure, as well as viewers' negotiated reading positions and active participation in television consumption.

Specifically, far from producing vulgar entertainment that aims purely at commercial profit, *Narrow Dwelling* skillfully critiques the housing crisis and exposes the corruption through the story of three notable female protagonists and a complex network of Party officials, property developers, white-collar workers, intellectuals, and working class people. The three female protagonists, two young sisters and a grandmother, actively confront surging real estate prices and the cannibalistic practices of real estate developers, so that the narrative demonstrates power dynamics among real estate providers, property seekers, and property owners under the backdrop of China's neo-liberal property market and urban development.

A poster of the Hong Kong TV drama, *L'Escargot*, whose narrative resembles that of *Narrow Dwelling*—a younger sister becomes the mistress of a rich property developer in order to help her older brother buy an apartment.

The result of this emphasis on women characters means that the storylines include a broken sentimental bond between a mother and her daughter, a controversial choice regarding sexual morality, and the traumatic death of the grandmother. This melodramatic script captures common painful experiences, and by focusing on women of different ages, classes, and origins, it dramatizes the yearning for homeownership and the current threat of urban demolition.

As two young sisters from a small town try to settle in a globalizing city, the script focuses on the desires and difficulties of the younger generation, whose members have no housing welfare guarantees and little ability to purchase an apartment. While the old grandmother receives the least on-screen time, her ending is the most tragic and powerful, inciting sympathy and indicting social injustice. The image of the grandmother epitomizes homeowners who resist forced relocation and demolition. Her story also exposes the conspiracy between officials and businessmen, as well as the ruthless means used by property developers to expel tenants. These female protagonists implicitly engage with the incompetence of ordinary and elite men alike, and highlight powerful men's easy access to wealth and women in a new economic order. Positioning women as prominent figures of the narrative downplays detailing any corruption scheme in which Party officials might be behind the circulation of apartments, thus enabling *Narrow Dwelling* to

The night scene of the fictional city Jiangzhou is in fact the Huangpu River in Shanghai, hinting at the fact that the globalizing city undergoing an

successfully pass the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television's [SARFT's] censorship screening and make it to air. Downplaying the investigation of government corruption seems necessary because, since the early 2000s, SARFT has publicly rejected production applications for shows belonging to the crime-related genre (*she an ju*) for the explicit purpose of eliminating improper sex and violence and the implicit purpose of protecting the Party's image.

Television as a commercial industry and subject of censorship

A brief overview of the commercialization and censorship of Chinese television production will set the foundation for a nuanced understanding of *Narrow Dwelling*'s production context. The Chinese television industry has been changing from state-oriented, i.e. propaganda, to more market-oriented (cultural commodity), gradually bringing programmatic variety to television production (Liu 2007; Xu 2003). Nonetheless, television remains subject to state intervention through the execution of censorship. The state has emphasizerd television's pedagogical/propagandist function since the establishment of the first Chinese television station in 1958.[3] The then Deputy Premier, Lu Dingyi, emphasized the differences between the socialist and capitalist uses of television, stating that "television is a tool for mass education. Every program has to be educational," and that "television in capitalist countries is for entertainment, but our television is for education..." (Guo 1991, 58). Accordingly, the state saw television as a tool for political propaganda and rejected any kind of economic activities revolving around television production until the end of the Cultural Revolution.

Haizao pays a weekly visit to Haiping and Su Chun in their cramped attic room, which serves as living room, dining room, study room, and bedroom.

In November 1979, the state loosened the control over commercial activities on television, and the Propaganda Department of the Communist Party of China legitimated commercial advertisements in mass media by delivering the "Notice Regarding Newspaper, Radio, Television Station Broadcasting Commercials of Foreign Commodities" ("Guanyu Baokan, Guangbo, Dianshitai Kanbo Waiguo Shangpin Guangao de Tongzhi") (Zhao 2004, 458-60). Television commercials brought huge profits to the television industry since then. In 2007, the income of nation-wide television commercials scored over RMB 51 billions (Guojia guangbo dianshi zongju 2007, 281). The 11th National Broadcast and Television Conference (Quanguo Guangbo Dianshi Gongzi Gongzuo Huiyi) in 1983 consented to further commercialize television production by broadening sources of income to compensate for the lack of financial support from the state. This decision was approved by the Party in the "Report Summary Regarding Broadcast and Television" in October 1983 (Xu 2003, 513; Zhao 2004, 460). The state finally specified television production as a third industry in June 1992 in the document "Decisions Regarding Increasing the Development Speed of the Third Industry" and gradually transformed the television industry from a financially state-sponsored burden into a self-run enterprise. This commercialization of the television industry began as a utilitarian way to save financially unsustainable television production during the late 1970s. The market would not have been able to infiltrate television production had the state not been in danger of going bankrupt.

Haiping and Su Chun take Haizao on a tour around Jiangzhou city, convincing her to stay in the city for the availability of global luxuries—the Japanese department store Isetan, Tag Heuer watches and Nike sports shoes.

Although the state began loosening up its domination over television production and accepted commercial activities to support television production after the Economic Reforms, it has remained in control of what kinds of programs can be produced or broadcast. For example, all television production units must submit an application for a production permit from SARFT prior to the start of any program production and must also apply for a broadcast permit prior to any airing. [4] SARFT or its local offices have the authority to request eliminating ideas or plots that the state finds unfit for the people. Among the allowed productions, the state maintains a hierarchical structure in which productions based on propagandistic pedagogy take preference over programs that aim to entertain. The state preserves its legal right to intervene in the name of preventing "over-

Haiping's mother suggests that Haiping leave the newborn baby with her in the suburbs, as the attic room is too cramped for an infant.

commercialization" or "over-marketization" of the industry. This censorship policy suggests the state's preference for programs that serve the state's interests.[5]

Haiping, acting like a shrew, criticizes Su Chun's economic incapability, and ...

... Su Chun threatens Haiping with divorce, as he grows impatient with Haipaing's frequent nagging.

Go to page 2

To top   Print version   JC 54   *Jump Cut* home

Haizao, now Song Siming's mistress and addicted to his sexual skills, enjoys sexual pleasure … and praises his vigor.

A salaried Xiaobei celebrates five hundred days of dating with Haizao by treating her to a visit to the aquarium. However, he loses Haizao to the much richer and more sexually-skilled Song Siming, who offers Haizao delicacies, an apartment, and a car, among many other commodities.

Narrow Dwelling as anti-corruption television drama and social critique

The actual dynamics between censorship policy and television production can be observed in the example of programming that takes as its theme anti-corruption, in this case, the television drama *Narrow Dwelling*. As Marwyn Samuels suggests, the boundaries and permissibility of censorship are far from fixed and unbending, and definitions of "sensitive" issues remain vague (2012, 168-9). Censorship policy is historically specific and changes over time. Therefore an issue once labeled as "sensitive" may not stay "sensitive" indefinitely. Because censorship policy is flexible and vague, there's room for negotiation. The television drama *Narrow Dwelling* not only provides an interesting case to illustrate negotiations between television drama producers and an official censorship policy against crime-related genre (*she an ju*) in general and especially anti-corruption drama. It also exemplifies the CCP's taming strategies in tackling critical cultural products.

Narrow Dwelling was created in a context in which SARFT reduced, rejected, and discouraged the production and broadcast of crime-related television programs. From 2003 to the present, SARFT has attempted to strictly control the airing time and the number of crime-related television programs. In 2003, SARFT strongly enforced the rule that crime-related television programs were not allowed to occupy more than ten percent of the total approved television programming. This move was likely aimed at preventing anti-corruption/crime-related dramas that depict corruption in the Party and officialdom, which might ruin the Party's image and call the current social system into question (SARFT 2004a). The policy in fact stood in line with a shift in the focus of China's anti-corruption campaign between 2005 and 2006 from fighting bribery and corruption in the public sector to fighting it in the private sector (Cheng 2006). Therefore, SARFT's discouragement of crime-related television dramas including those dealing with corruption probably belongs to a larger state project of maintaining the Party's upright image.

In 2004, under the premises of cultivating a healthy environment for youth, SARFT promulgated the Notice Regarding Reinforcement of Censorship and Broadcast Management of Crime-genre Television Dramas, which stated that all television channels must arrange for any crime-related programs to be broadcast after 11 p.m. (after prime-time), regardless of whether or not the program was already in the process of airing or had a scheduled airdate. In addition, all administrative and censorship departments had to strictly reduce the number of visual products concerning crime broadcast on television and control the amount of crime depicted (SARFT 2004b). After seeing an increasing number of applications to shoot crime-related television dramas, SARFT reiterated its discouraging stance in 2008 and again in 2011, emphasizing that the 2004 regulation was still in force (SARFT 2008a; Baotou Municipal Bureau of Radio, Film, and Television 2011).

Therefore, because *Narrow Dwelling*'s producers proposed a melodramatic narrative focusing on women rather than an investigation into Party corruption, they came up with a safe, strategic move to pass censorship. Had *Narrow Dwelling*'s production team identified its subject matter as crime-related on the "Report Filing Form For Television Drama Shooting and Production" (*Dianshiju paishe zhizuo bei'an gongshi biao*), an application form required to apply for a shooting permit for any television drama in the PRC, the show's chance of passing

A split screen showing how Song Siming and Haizao's affair simultaneously betrays both Song's wife (the top left) and Xiaobei (on the right).

Xiaobei wails and admits he still loves Haizao.

Haizao cries shamefully upon hearing Xiaobei's decision to stay with her.

the initial screening stage would have been slim. Instead, *Narrow Dwelling* defined its subject matter as a "contemporary-city theme" and successfully acquired a shooting permit (SARFT 2008c). It also went through the second censoring stage smoothly and obtained a distribution permit (*faxing xuke zheng*), a license allowing a television drama to be released on television or in other formats.

In discussing interactions between the state's censorship policy and the dexterous narratives incorporated by television dramas, I find especially pertinent Foucault's concept of reproductive power. SARFT's policy of controlling the number of crime-related television dramas, particularly those related to corruption, originates from the state's suspicion that crime-related television dramas that vividly depict corruption in the Party might chip away at the Party's integral image. In this light, state censorship, conceived as a Foucauldian form of power, is not repressive but productive (1979, 194). Television dramas, like other forms of cultural productions, are not purely commercial products, nor are they produced by individuals whom the state entirely manipulates. The censorship policy on crime-related television dramas produces *negotiated* portrayals of corruption, such as that in *Narrow Dwelling*; in this case, the show uses prominent women characters to also interweave and expose a network of corrupted members of Party officials, property developers, and bankers.

Narrow Dwelling, first broadcast in 2009, created huge echoes in the PRC. Its high rate of viewership in Mainland China encouraged Taiwan and Hong Kong broadcasting companies to air it on their local channels. In addition, *Woju*'s narrative inspired Television Broadcasts Limited (a.k.a TVB) in Hong Kong to produce *L'Escargot* (Quezhai nannü, 2012), a thirty-episode television drama featuring a young woman involved in an extra-marital affair for the sake of gaining financial assistance in buying an apartment.[6] [open endnotes in new window] Back in Mainland China, *Narrow Dwelling's* popularity on the small screen further pushed its adaptation into another genre—a stage play; its Chinese title, *Woju*, literally "snail dwelling," became one of the most popular terms in 2009 mainstream media (National Language Resource Monitoring and Research Center, 2009).[7] Now, *woju*, as a verb, means to inhabit in a narrow dwelling; as a noun, it is the name for the narrow dwelling itself.

Viewers' furious discussions about this problem provoked public responses from two Chinese Communist Party officials. At the 2009 Annual Meeting of Television Production Committee of the China Radio Television Association, the department head of Television Program Management (*dianshiju guanlisi*) at SARFT, Li Jingsheng, publicly criticized the hit television drama, accusing it of having negative social effects. (*Nanfang dushi bao* 2009; Zhu 2009). However, about two months later, Premier Wen Jiabao appropriated *Narrow Dwelling*'s Chinese title into his political performance to enhance his political capital, not criticizing it, but rather using it as a tool to express his concern for the pitiful occupants of narrow urban dwellings (Xinhuanet 2010). I will first analyze the heterogeneous narrative of *Narrow Dwelling* as a sign of how it negotiated with anti-corruption policy and return to these two officials' responses afterwards.

Narrow Dwelling was adapted from a popular novel with the same Chinese title, written by Liuliu (2007), a Singapore-based writer in her late thirties who left China in 1999. The narrative revolves around two sisters, Haiping and Haizao, who leave their parents in their rural hometown to study and work in the city. Their efforts to secure an apartment establish how the skyrocketing price of real estate burdens urban dwellers, who frequently voice complaints about real estate companies. *Narrow Dwelling* situates its characters in a fictional, contemporary,

neo-liberal Chinese city that is experiencing furious property development. Though the fictional city is called Jiangzhou, *Narrow Dwelling* actually hints that the setting is Shanghai by inserting night scenes of the Huangpu River and including the detail that its protagonists are graduates of Fudan University. Implying that the on-screen socio-economic landscape is Shanghai speaks to off-screen audiences' painful urban experience in real-life Chinese cities, where rising property prices benefit the rich alone and burden ordinary urban white-collar workers, not to mention the lower class. In the drama, rent in the city is so unaffordable that Haizao stays with her sister and brother-in-law in a cramped attic room where they have to share a kitchen and bathroom with their neighbors. The older sister has to send her baby girl to stay with her grandmother in their rural hometown because of their inadequate living space.

In the drama, men occupy a dominant power position in gender relations, regardless of whether the woman is the victim or the perpetrator of adultery:

Xiaobei, Haizao's boyfriend, rapes her as he realizes her sexual affair with Song Siming ...

... while Song Siming rapes his wife when she condemns his adultery.

The television drama goes on to reveal corruption among Party officials and business tycoons. Haizao later forfeits her relationship with her fiancé to become the mistress of a married Party official, Song Siming, in order to try to help her older sister buy an apartment. In addition to the primary focus on the sisters, there is a subplot involving Li *nainai* (Grandma Li) and her family, Haiping's old neighbors, who squat on their tiny property and refuse to relocate without proper compensation. Grandma Li dies accidentally due to a developer's scheme to expel the Li family from their house. Ironically her tragic death results in the fulfillment of the Li family's request for a three-bedroom apartment. They eventually obtain a dream residence at the cost of Grandma Li's life, and become Haiping's neighbors once more. The drama concludes with Haiping's happy reunion with her daughter in the metropolis, Haizao's departure for the United States after a hysterectomy due to a miscarriage in a fight with Song Siming's wife, and Song Siming's untimely end.

These pronounced female characters—Haiping, Haizao, and Grandma Li—are significant, for they signal that *Narrow Dwelling*'s vision not only bestows sympathy on women, but also, through the focal point of women, critiques an economy-centered and humanity-deprived contemporary China, and more importantly, reveals a hidden corruption network. Through showcasing the women characters as they navigate a rapidly developing economy and negotiate it in public and private spaces, *Narrow Dwelling*'s melodramatic narrative mirrors off-screen social problems in a surging property market which, according to the narrative, originates from officials' corruption.

Haizao, pregnant, requests intimacy with Song and suggests a "nine soft one hard" penetration

technique, which she believes will do no harm to the fetus.

Haizao informs Haiping of her pregnancy. Haiping recommends aborting the illegitimate embryo while Haizao argues naively that present-day society is more liberal and tolerant of all kinds of relationships.

So what are these women's predicaments, and how do their experiences tease out the socio-economic and political situations of Jiangzhou (or in reality Shanghai) and more broadly other major Chinese cities? The three female protagonists want a chance to become modern, global citizens and improve their lives; however, they turn into victims of modern development. The two young sisters represent contemporary versions of educated, elite women, simultaneously agents of and victims in the building of a global China. China's current modernization project strives to build global cities and help China become a world superpower. Such a modernization project repeatedly offers both opportunities and snares for women. For example, it gives the older sister, Haiping, a discursive space in which to aspire to be a "global citizen," yet her choice to become an urban dweller also forces her to forsake what she sees as an essential female role in order to participate in the modernization project. Similarly, the new discourse of pursuing individual desire renders Haizao, the younger sister, an active agent of her own sexual desires, but it also casts her in a negative light when she becomes a mistress and is punished for violating long-established codes of conduct, virtue, and morality. Grandma Li intends to grasp an opportunity offered by urban redevelopment to exchange her shabby property for a modern apartment but she loses her life in the process of negotiation with real estate developers.

I maintain that *Narrow Dwelling* illustrates gender-specific sacrifices as women participate in the current nation-building project and uses women's suffering—a common literary trope—as a strategy to accomplish three things at once:

- first, it manifests the production team and Liuliu's consistent concern for women's issues;
- second, it adheres to commercial considerations, as women's agony is a common theme in the Chinese people's literary imagination, making the narrative more powerful in inviting viewers' identification;
- third, it is a tactful orchestration avoiding overt political critique and thus political censure.

Go to page 3

Newspaper headline names Grandma Li's family "the toughest squatters" as they protest against real estate developer by hanging a banner outside their half-destroyed house which reads "Government, please save the people."

A squatter house in Chongqing standing out strikingly on a site where its neighboring buildings have all been torn down.

The Li family, refusing to relocate, uses candles

In the following section, I will first analyze the ways Haiping, Haizao, and Grandma Li become agents and victims of the current modernization project, and then discuss the social problems revealed by their trials. I will also demonstrate how and why the use of prominent female characters as a skillful plot device teases out a corrupt network between the government and the market.

The state's goal of "joining the international orbit" and economic disparities between urban and rural areas have turned the city into a symbol of cosmopolitanism and development, a fantasy land where its dwellers become rich and proud of their global citizenship. Such a discourse creates a psychological place for Haiping, where she imagines herself to be a member of the global citizenry in China. She then becomes Americanized and consumes international luxuries such as Hag Heuer watches and Nike sports shoes. Hence, she acts as an agent who persuades her husband and younger sister to stay in the city after their graduation from college. Her move represents the endorsement of modern development. Such a decision, unfortunately, opens a Pandora's box for her family. Her choices turn her into a negative shrew who yells at her husband for his economic incapability and breaks the bond between herself and her young daughter. Although the sisters and their sexual partners are all college graduates, these educated elite still experience the pressure of making a livelihood in the city due to the unreasonable, surging real estate prices. Haiping's choice to live in a packed attic room leads to two long years of separation and alienation from her daughter. Feeling this separation, a heart-broken Haiping snivels that all she desires after her painful pregnancy and sacrifice for the sake of promotion at work is an intimate mother-child relationship, but her own flesh and blood is not close to her.

Narrow Dwelling highlights Haiping's motherly pain as emblematic of the many social injustices and economic disparities resulting from the development of China via globalization and the corruption that accompanies it. Such images of suffering women are a common trope in ideological literature that aims to critique a corrupted system. For instance, during the May Fourth era in the 1920s, Lu Xun's "The New Year Sacrifice" (1924) uses Xianglin Sao, a twice-widowed, uneducated peasant woman, to serve as an image of the injustices of the traditional Chinese patriarchal social order (Huters 1993). *Narrow Dwelling*, through Haiping's commentary, repeatedly blames the real estate market for the separation of mother and daughter, and with dramatized pain, emphasizes the reality of the property market in Shanghai and other Chinese cities.

The other protagonist, Haizao, illustrates another aspect of women's lives as they live as victims and agents of the current modernization: sexuality. Haizao believes that she is allowed to pursue an all-compassing, individualistic desire, and that society under the current state ideology of consumption will accommodate her pursuit of sexual desire even though it is, in fact, adultery. She also perceives herself as an active sexual subject in control of the affair through her active participation in sex acts. She asks

to light the house when water and electricity supply are cut off. Unfortunately, Grandma Li falls down in the dark and becomes paralyzed.

The Li family enjoys Chinese New Year dinner in a cramped candle-lit room…

...while Song Siming spends the Spring Festival with his family in a spacious and nicely decorated villa. These two consecutive sequences sharply contrast the living conditions of the poor with those of Party officials.

The sound of hammering on the ceiling alarms a paralyzed Grandma Li.

Song Siming, her married lover, to pretend to rape her so that she can enjoy the pleasure obtained from acting like a victim. Even when she becomes pregnant, she refuses to constrain her sexual desire and convinces Song to have sex with her, suggesting a "nine soft one hard" penetration technique, which she believes will do no harm to the fetus. Involved in an extra-marital affair, Haizao regards being a mistress as an underground occupation and herself as an underground laborer.

The surging real estate market is part of the larger, neo-liberal logic of consumption, which leads Haizao to mistakenly believe that sexual consumption is an expression of gender-neutral desire that undoes the existing traditional codes of conduct, virtue, and morality projected on women. Yet, due to socially inculcated gender differences between men and women, Haizao experiences a distinct consequence as a result of her sexual relationship, in spite of the fact that she and her partner participated equally in the act of adultery. Haizao's naïve belief in the value of neo-liberal desire renders her subject to her fiancé's violent reaction to her infidelity. When her boyfriend learns of her affair, Haizao seeks his pardon, only to be raped. In contrast, Song receives support from his wife even after his indiscretions are exposed and he loses power. Song also rapes his wife when she condemns his adultery. The rapes of Haizao and Song's wife suggest that men occupy a dominant power position in gender relations, regardless of whether a woman is the victim or the perpetrator of adultery. This contradicts with young urban Chinese women's fantasy of being free, desirous, and consuming subjects, the shared fantasy that inspires anthropologist Lisa Rofel's proposal that desire is at the heart of consumption, and thus, a new cosmopolitan self in post-socialist China (118). While urban Chinese women, according to Rofel, now have freedom to consume and cultivate a self that desires instead of one that sacrifices (119), the rape of Haizao and Song's wife suggests a persistent gender difference in the consequences of sexual desire. Ultimately, cosmopolitan desire allows the woman to yearn for consumption, but sexual consumption remains the man's privilege.

The most tragic female character is not one of the young sisters, but rather a grandmother who occupies a relatively minor role in *Narrow Dwelling*— Grandma Li. Grandma Li, in her old age, is the head of her four-member household composed of her son, Li Wuji, her daughter-in-law, Xu Li, and her college student grandson, Ah Gu. With the exception of the grandson, who lives on campus, the family members reside in an old, shabby house that is around one hundred square feet. The aged Grandma Li has no ability to earn money, and the son and daughter-in-law typify individuals of the social underclass who, in Grandma Li's words, have no money, no professional skills, no qualifications, and no social status. Li Wuji is a security guard at an arcade where he is subjected to customers' violence and Xu Li is a domestic helper who has no stable job and a low income. Therefore, it is impossible for the family to afford nice living conditions.

Grandma Li convinces her son and daughter-in-law that the demolition is an excellent opportunity to acquire an apartment for their family of three generations, given that their dilapidated asset is located at the center of an urban redevelopment project. They reject relocation firmly unless the real estate developer exchanges their small property for a three-bedroom apartment. The Li family is determined to squat until the last minute and willing to bear with the hardship of having no electricity and water due to the razing of neighboring houses. Unfortunately, Grandma Li falls down in the dark and breaks her legs. Grandma Li is overly optimistic that the family's refusal to move will force the real estate developer to compromise,

She crawls to look for his son and daughter-in-law when villainous construction workers begin tearing down the ceiling.

Camera close-ups of Grandma Li's horrified face.

From Grandma Li's point-of-view …

... we see the ceiling collapse, fall, and crush her.

and she underestimates the risk of resisting a profit-driven real estate company. As the real estate company's patience wears thin, the company boss orders construction workers to tear down part of the Li's apartment roof illegally in order to create an uninhabitable environment for them and take over their house. Grandma Li, in an effort to protect their home, crawls to stop the villainous construction workers and is tragically crushed by the falling ceiling. She is buried in debris and dies at the crime scene.

Through its three women victims, *Narrow Dwelling* reveals four different kinds of social injustice and irony, as well as economic disparities, while indirectly pointing towards corruption as the ultimate cause for these problems. First, the two sisters endure a housing crisis in contemporary China, in which the unbearable housing prices burden common people and turn them into mortgage slaves. Given the long-established desire in the Chinese context to possess one's own assets, the younger generation, regardless of having formed a family or not, is driven to fight for property ownership. Establishing the sisters' origins in a rural hometown explains and magnifies their need to buy an apartment, as they have no family members or relatives in the city with whom to share. They represent the younger generation who works for the private sector and enjoys no state welfare.

The two couples, Su Chun and Haiping, and Xiao Bei and Haizao are all college graduates and belong to the white-collar class; however, none of them is able to afford a reasonably sized apartment. The younger sister, Haizao, particularly exposes young women's moral ambiguity, as well as the quandaries of economically-modest men. Haizao's affair with a married Song Siming bespeaks the fact that younger women are willing to sell their natural capital—the body—to bail themselves out of their financial difficulties in the new economic order. A salaried Xiao Bei is unwittingly betrayed and becomes a passive victim of Haizao's infidelity, while a rich Song Siming, who collects bribes and takes advantage of his official position, gains privileged access to women. Song's economic power, for an idler like Haizao or other women who desire a comfortable life, qualifies him to be a preferred lover over a proletarian such as Xiao Bei, regardless of his marital status. This plot point suggests that men who are not opportunists in a money-oriented society will have their masculinity stripped from them and will become the ultimate losers in the new economic order. Economically disenfranchised men lose in the competition for women; wealthy men or opportunists win out in the scramble for both material possessions and women.

Grandma Li's heart-wrenching case reveals the threat and social injustice that urban development imposes on existing homeowners. Grandma Li is the mastermind behind her family's battle to acquire a bigger apartment. Selecting an impoverished, elderly individual as the representative of general home owners exaggerates the vulnerability and exploitation of ordinary people in a neo-liberal real estate market. Grandma Li is persuaded by a group of resident committee members of her neighborhood (an embodiment of the state ideology of development) to move out for demolition. The lobbyists claim that the situation represents a rare chance occurring only once in a thousand years (*qianzai nanfeng de jihui*) to

Grandma Li's son and daughter-in-law attempt to save her after the house collapses.

The Li family visits a new three-bedroom apartment—their compensation for Grandma Li's death.

Ah Gu, Grandma Li's grandson, is excited to select his bedroom.

improve the Li family's living conditions and that they will be able to reside in a modern-style apartment where they will have a private bathroom and kitchen and a convenient flush toilet. They also hustle Grandma Li to keep up with the new environment (*genshang xingshi*) and the new thoughts (*xin sixiang*) and maintain a cosmopolitan lifestyle. Such rhetoric glosses over the menaces and misery that the downtrodden have to suffer under the state's practices, promising a bright future and better life by accentuating superficial abstractions like globalization, metropolitanism, and economic progress.

Yet Grandma Li's cold sarcasm exposes what indeed happens to commoners as Chinese cities evolve into global metropolises. Ordinary people occupy a lower and lower social status (*yue huo yue jian*) and are eventually expelled from their own homes and communities in the downtown area in order to make room for foreigners and the rich. Once new luxurious apartments are built, former residents are never able to afford a new home on the same land with their small amount of compensation money. Grandma Li's remarks unmask the social injustice that development benefits the rich alone while leaving behind the powerless petites urbanites. In launching urban redevelopment projects, the government creates advantages for its ordinary citizens and current home owners, but only to generate profit-seeking opportunities for cannibalistic enterprises or corrupted officials. Modern, high-quality residences are built for wealthy external buyers rather than the humble people who are indigenous to the area.

The Li Family's resistance to relocation also displays the social issue of squatters (*dingzihu*). Grandma, Xu Li, and Li Wuji hang a large piece of cloth which reads "Government, please save the people" outside their half-destroyed house, earning them a newsworthy reputation for being "the toughest squatters" (*zui niu dingzihu*). The phrase "the toughest squatters" was not coined by *Narrow Dwelling*'s scriptwriter but borrowed from a real contemporary context. In August 2006, a blog entry entitled "The Toughest Shanghainese Squatters" circulated on the Internet; in February and March, 2007, another piece of news went viral in the cyber world, this time, "The Toughest Chongqing Squatters." The former emphasized the temerarious measures the owners used to defy the government and real estate developers who attempted to make them vacate a house, while the latter reported on the sensationalized spectacle of a squatter house in Chongqing standing out strikingly on a site where its neighboring buildings had all been torn down. (Li 2010). The death of Grandma Li also indicts ruthless real estate developers who ignore people's rights and lives for gains, scheming to pay the least compensation and making the most profit by pressuring people to move.

Assigning women as the active agents of buying and bargaining for an apartment accents social ironies of contemporary male intellectuals' impotence, loss of moral vision, and indifference to social unjustness. Instead of reflecting on the source of such shocking real estate prices and driving social change, Su Chun and Xiao Bei devote their labor to salaried work and money management, hoping to save enough money for a down payment. Su Chun even accuses Haiping of being overly picky in their initial stage of apartment hunting, causing them to miss a golden chance to purchase a property at a lower rate. Incapable of affording an apartment in the city, he chooses to withstand Haiping's wailing about his economic impotence by repeating,

"Yes, yes, yes, it's all my fault. Had I been more capable, my

wife would not have to suffer so much."

While Haiping and Haizao abandon loyalty and honesty by hiding Haizao's infidelity from Xiao Bei, the financially disempowered and henpecked Su Chun stays mute and fails to maintain moral order. These plots are indicative of a situation in which male intellectuals, although present, are morally ambivalent. Unlike their predecessors, who protested against inflation, political systems, and social injustice in Tian'anmen Square in 1989, intellectuals after the 1989 Protest were first disillusioned regarding political engagement, then overwhelmed and occupied by the quest for money and the economic freedom created by the retreat of various kinds of social welfare and the deepening of the Economic Reforms after 1992. In a marketized China, they are too preoccupied to fight for their own benefits and have to accommodate immoralities for the sake of economic concerns. Therefore, they are not able to act as moral leaders, critically engage in current affairs, or combat social iniquities.[8] [open endnotes in new window]

The most odious (if obscure) young male intellectual is Grandma Li's grandson, Ah Gu. Ah Gu's grandmother mentions him several times, but he only physically appears two times on the screen, first when his family is fighting against urban renewal, and then when his parents are assigned to a new apartment. In the scene where he first appears in his shanty home for Chinese New Year, not only does he fail to show pity for his broken-legged old grandmother, but he also appears blind to the injustice that puts his family into literal darkness, as the real estate company has cut off their electricity and water supply. As the Li family appears in the brand new apartment they receive as compensation for Grandma Li's death, Ah Gu excitedly navigates the layout and chooses his room without a single sign of sadness for the human cost of the apartment. Ah Gu's dramatized, detestable, cold attitude toward his family's hardship is indicative of the attitudes of young intellectuals, who are indifferent to social injustice and the extent to which the unjust system burdens them personally. Perhaps it is now more apt to call these filmic college graduates "educated elites" rather than "intellectuals," as their actions do not reflect superior knowledge or morality. The secularization of intellectuals is well-illustrated in the scene in which Haizao teases her sister for being a philistine (*tai xianshi*) and for giving up her literary pursuit for the sake of earning a living. Haiping compares economic needs to a fish and literature to a cilantro garnish, meaning that one has to first meet one's needs before pursuing idealism.

Rather than merely portraying social disarray revolving around women, *Narrow Dwelling* indeed pierces into deeper societal structures and attributes social iniquity to corruption by embedding it in a sensationalized plot set in motion by women characters. For example, chapter eight interlaces Haiping's desperate desire for fixing her broken mother-daughter bond with the collusion between the government and the market. We first see Haiping touring a decent, newly-built apartment and making a decision to purchase it in preparation for the reunification with her daughter. We then see a meeting between Song Siming and Property Developer Zhang (who previously appeared in episode six, during which he pressured potential property buyers into paying a higher price for assets). Song and Zhang plot to create convenience for the developer and profit from an urban renewal plan. Here, the corrupted official undermines the people's interest and transfers wealth to the real estate developer; Song, in return, takes bribes from these developers. As a result of this businessmen-officials conspiracy, ordinary people are caught in a net woven by the

The investigation of Haizao and Haiping brings Song Siming's corruption to light and leads the investigation team to Chen Sifu.

Chen Sifu, Haiping's boss and a real estate developer, is a go-between for Haiping and Song Siming's affair and a vital piece in Song's corruption board-game. Grandma Li's death exposes the hidden relationship between Chen Sifu and Song Siming, which leads the investigation team to Mayor Zhang and Bank President Xie.

Song Siming, representing Mayor Zhang, proposes an embezzlement scheme…

corrupted government and unscrupulous enterprises and become mortgage slaves. Episode eight illustrates this entrapment by shifting its narrative back to Haiping's shopping for her ideal home, in which we see Haiping and her husband signing a twenty-year mortgage contract, agreeing to pay the bank two thirds of their monthly household income as installments. Such a narrative structure clearly attributes the irrational and unaffordable real estate prices to governmental corruption.

Why do we encounter Haiping's sentimental yearning for a reunification with her beloved daughter and her insistence on buying an apartment that is priced out of her household's financial capacity? If *Narrow Dwelling*'s ultimate focus is two young women's struggle to stay in the city, why do we see the tragedy of Grandma Li? If Grandma Li is significant, why is it that her story occupies a relatively insignificant portion of the television drama? If the three women are purely innocent characters, why are they shown as morally ambivalent: supporting infidelities, willingly working as a "professional mistress," or greedily requesting an exchange of a small property for a bigger apartment? I argue that these women's dislocated desire represents a narrative thread that leads us to the core of the social problem. Jeffery Kinkley, a historian researching Chinese anti-corruption novels, argues that women have served as subordinates in anti-corruption television dramas in this way:

> "…women are chiefly means by which males are corrupted, or at least tempted…In realms of power, other females are likely to be mistresses" (2007, 40).

His reading is valid in pointing out women's likelihood to be mistresses in television dramas on anti-corruption. However, in contrast, *Narrow Dwelling* is noteworthy for the fact that it positions women as notable, active agents in the housing crisis, and more importantly, as threads to develop and reveal corrupted characters.

Female protagonists set the whole narrative in motion by directing us to a complex network of various victims and villains. Haiping drives her sister into developing a sexual affair with a corrupted Party official, Song Siming, for monetary benefits. Song is yet another thread to fabricate a further subsidiary plot concerning a bigger corruption scam. Although a leading protagonist who attracts viewers' attention, he is not the true culprit of an about-to-succeed scheme; rather, his senior, an even higher Party official—Mayor Zhang—the mayor of a metropolitan Jiangzhou, is the primary perpetrator. Finally, we learn that it is the inappropriate economic desires of Party officials that cause the misfortune of the on-screen women and, by logical extension, the pain of off-screen ordinary people. It is also Haiping's everyday network that brings out the story of Grandma Li's apartment squatting, as the Lis are her neighbors.

In this way, by developing connections between the storylines, the narrative sets up a detective mode of reading that dovetails with an on-screen investigation into Song's corruption scheme. In Episodes Sixteen and Thirty-one, the anti-corruption investigation team reports that the inspection of Haiping, Haizao, and the death of Grandma Li leads them to Chen Sifu, Haizao's boss, the real estate developer who indirectly causes Grandma Li's death, and a vital piece in Song Siming's corruption boardgame. The examination of Chen Sifu then directs the investigation team further to Bank President Xie's indecent role in assisting Chen Sifu's

... to Bank President Xie's representative…

... and a real estate developer through whom Bank President Xie mobilizes RMB 300 million in order to support Chen Sifu in raising funds through the Hong Kong Stock Market.

Mayor Zhang, Song's supervisor, is the culprit behind a series of collusions with real estate developers.

The anti-corruption team leader reports Song Siming's corruption case to a Party Secretary.

small company to become a publicly traded enterprise on Hong Kong's stock market, aiming to snowball even more capital. At a later point we are told that Bank President Xie himself embezzles two billion RMB for stock speculation in the United States. In other words, these women characters are clues to holes in the officials' corruption plans and provide fissures through which to pierce social injustice. Haizao and Grandma Li especially represent a breach (*tubokou*, in the words of the investigation team leader) of the power network that the above corrupted Party officials have woven.

This explanation urges us to raise further questions about the narrative design. If corruption is a fundamental concern of the narrative, why does it embed the corruption in Haiping's hysterical pursuit of an apartment? If Song Siming, a corrupted official, signifies bad elements of the Party, why is he played by a good-looking actor, Zhang Jiayi, who receives warm support from viewers, and particularly female viewers? If *Narrow Dwelling* aims to expose the government's corruption, why does the narrative draw our attention to the two young women who interweave all other characters and superficially present the three women's greed, ignorance, and stubbornness as the crux of social disorder? To answer these questions, it will be helpful to consider *Narrow Dwelling*'s form. It's an easily accessible television drama. Due to the state's firm belief in the propagandistic role of media and literature, it is subject to censorship before, during, and even after production. Although television program production is becoming increasingly marketized, the state remains an influential factor in determining if a television program is able to reach the Chinese home screen. The availability and production of particular kinds of genres is monitored by SARFT, in the name of generating a healthy society and protecting the youth. The discouragement of anti-corruption television program explains why *Narrow Dwelling* does not specifically focus on an anti-corruption theme, although the narrative points to corruption as the ultimate source of social evils. In other words, the rationality of producing a melodramatic and sensationalized narrative instead of exploring a crime genre (*she an ju*) plot (in this case corruption) is arguably associated with the show's production context in China.

What became of *Narrow Dwelling*'s vision? What kind of socio-economic context gave rise to and enabled such a controversial narrative? Social resentments towards the property market in the script are based on solid economic facts. The turn of the twenty-first century saw the "full marketization" of housing provisions (Li and Zheng 2007; Lee and Zhu 2006), which turned one of every citizen's necessities—a shelter—into an unaffordable commodity. The real estate market price became an index for China's economic growth. Big cities such as Shanghai rely on demolition, urban redevelopment, and creation of luxury housing in order to develop into global cosmopolitan centers. Development projects have driven up the land prices for real estate in the city center, such that homes are now an unaffordable, high-priced commodity under the logic of the market economy. The increase in the real estate price in Shanghai has been truly shocking; the average price for a square meter of commodity housing increased 270% from 2001 to 2007 (Hua 2009, 134). Ordinary citizens, especially those from the younger generation who did not enjoy seniority in state-owned enterprises that would allow for the purchase of work-unit housing, had to purchase their homes at skyrocketing market prices. The

real estate market price has become an index for China's economic growth but does not demonstrate Chinese people's pain as they are caught in sweeping changes provoked by the housing reforms and the state ideology of developmentalism. Critical television dramas such as *Narrow Dwelling*, through exposing the predicaments of two types of city dwellers situated in a booming real estate market, resonate to the real estate prices in reality and subtly point to business-government collusion as the real source of social injustice.

The good-looking actor, Zhang Jiayi, who was cast as Song Siming, garnered warm support from audience members, and particularly females, despite his role as a corrupt Party official.

Haizao claims to be happy as a professional mistress and underground laborer but ...

Reacting to *Narrow Dwelling*

This series' heterogeneous narrative provokes equally heterogeneous audience responses from both Party officials and common people. My analysis of the ways the attitudes of Party officials change from repressive to tolerant and appropriating is followed by a discussion of the reactions of common people towards *Narrow Dwelling*'s censored, moralized ending.

Let us study the criticism towards *Narrow Dwelling* by the Department Head of the Television Program Management (*dianshiju guanlisi*) of SARFT. On December 9, 2009, announcing television drama could occupy only forty percent of the total broadcast time on provincial satellite channels,[9] [open endnotes in new page] Li Jingsheng commented,

> "the television program brought negative effects to society and attracted viewers through sex, obscene jokes, corruption, and scandals...These vulgar subject matters will reduce television drama's quality"(*Nanfang dushi bao*/Southern metropolis daily 2009).

He also proclaimed that SARFT would strictly ensure the syncretism of entertainment, pedagogy, and ideological content in the next year. His accusatory undertone implied that the use of sex and corruption as subject matter in *Narrow Dwelling* contaminated the entertainment/market logic of television drama production in general. Sexual connotations and bed scenes undoubtedly exist, but to ascribe the success of *Narrow Dwelling* only to vulgarity completely ignores the appeal of the everyday life experience depicted in the television drama. It is even more problematic to subordinated *corruption* under the umbrella term of *vulgarity*, and to claim that vulgarity reduces television program quality. First, the discourse of vulgarity attempts to cloak *Narrow Dwelling*'s socio-political critique under the flamboyant camouflage of sexual controversy. Second, positing such a discursive cause-and-effect relation seemingly legitimizes SARFT's stricter control over television programs. If the current form of *Narrow Dwelling* is a successfully disguised crime-related drama, to accuse its revelation of corruption of being vulgar is the state's gesture to silence critical discussions on Haiping's resentment against unreasonable housing prices and potential reasons for such a surging price index, including government corruption. Therefore, such a discourse of vulgarity establishes *Narrow Dwelling* and television drama in general as the target of discipline/management, legitimizing "tighter quality control" that, in fact, may be ideological control. This criticism overlooks *Narrow Dwelling*'s critique of the skyrocketing housing prices and resultant social problems, and tries to obstruct *Narrow Dwelling*'s palpable capacity for offering viewers a way to project,

... is confronted by Song's wife at the end of the TV drama.

Song's wife pushes a pregnant Haizao against the edge of a couch, hurting Haizao's stomach. The pain knocks Haizao unconscious, and the collision causes a miscarriage.

express, and discuss their pain and discontent regarding housing prices in social reality.

Indeed, news critics in *Chongqing chenbao*(Chongqing daily, 2009), *Beijing qingnian bao*(Yang 2009), and *Shanghai shibao* (Ma and Xu 2009), to name a few, associated *Narrow Dwelling*'s popularity with its strong ability to invite viewers' sentimental projections, as its narrative is close to real life. In other words, people find the television drama appealing not simply because of its sexual connotations, but because its narrative captures and mimics viewers' anger, pain, and sorrow concerning the difficulty of purchasing an apartment at a time of uncontrolled rise in property prices. Viewers are able to decode *Narrow Dwelling*'s critique of housing prices and corruption, proving that the alleged vulgar elements—sex and obscenity—indeed serve as a disguise. In actuality, Li's attempt failed to suppress viewers' passion for discussing *Narrow Dwelling*. Instead, it stirred up hostility towards him on the Internet,[10] which resulted in a "thorough background check" (*renrou sousuo*) wrongly accusing him of owning two luxurious residences (*Xinmin wanbao* 2009). However, Li's condemning remarks did succeed in signaling to television channels and other media to downplay the promotion and discussion of *Narrow Dwelling*, which indirectly checked the media's discussion of the housing crisis and prevented further provocation of viewers' discontent.[11]

In response to viewers' growing yearnings for solutions to the over-heated property market, Wen Jiabao adopted another strategy to absorb people's resentment. His sympathetic statement ,"I also understand the feelings of [living in a so-called] 'woju,'" took the meaning of *woju* as metaphor for the pain of his fellow citizens and imputed the problem of a tiny-sized residence to China's limited land supply and the rapid increase of property prices (Xinhuanet 2010). When asked about solutions to rising property prices, he explained away the reason for high prices, citing inadequate supply of land and residences. He promised to build more lower-priced apartments and check speculative activities, completely ignoring *Narrow Dwelling*'s call for governmental probity. Even Li Jingsheng was able to observe the presence of corruption in *Narrow Dwelling*'s narrative, raising the question of how Wen Jiabao missed it when he appropriated the Chinese title of the television drama to address people's grievances over skyrocketing property prices. It is probably the case that the oversight is actually a political strategem to tame citizens' resentments and divert people's attention to a politically neutral reason for their pain. The changing official attitudes towards *Narrow Dwelling* demonstrate the state's incorporation of critical noises into political capital.

Viewers' reactions to *Narrow Dwelling*'s approved, orthodox ending reveal another layer of negotiation with censorship, and in this case, self-censorship. The main course of *Narrow Dwelling* portrays the process in which Haizao becomes a happy "professional mistress," enjoying access to material wealth. However, its ending punishes the unfaithful subjects, Haizao and Song Siming, thus conforming to a monogamist value system. Such a moralizing ending simultaneously

Haizao in the hospital after a hysterectomy.

Song Siming rushes to the hospital after hearing Haizao's bad news but crashes into a truck and dies.

serves as a sign of self-censorship and a smart way to pass through a censorship system that targets radical representations of sexuality and illegitimate relationships and emphasizes sanitization of the screen. I inspect the narrative closure during Episodes Thirty to Thirty-Five, which ends with a moral lesson for the contemporary mistress.[12] Haizao and Song's affair violates monogamist morality and legal codes on marriage; hence, the adulterers are punished.

Narrow Dwelling ends with Haizao's miscarriage and the removal of her uterus and Song's death in a car accident on the way to the hospital. Such a conclusion starkly contrasts with the characters' previous happy sexual journey. The annihilation of the embryo seems necessary for the maintenance of orthodox morality, as it signifies failure of both the adulterers' bonding and the fruit of Song's excessive sexual desire. Taking away Haizao's reproductive ability is a harsh and significant punishment because it indicates a possibility that Haizao has a lesser chance of finding a husband in the future—as the concept of having a (male) child to continue the family line remains important in Mainland China. To render the moral lesson more explicit and eliminate the possibility that Haizao could continue on as a shameless woman who sees no wrong in her actions, the ending also portrays Haizao showing regret for the adultery. In the last episode, Haizao arrives at enlightenment and recognizes her unfaithful adventure as an enchantment of commodity, which resulted in her losing Xiao Bei, a man who once truly loved her. Such "enlightenment" admits that the previous pursuit of sexual freedom and commodities was futile and destructive. Therefore, though excessive desire and exchanging sex for materials may appear to be legitimate or appealing during the course of the narrative, the closing scenes reprimand characters, particularly women, for their illegitimate sex and decadence. Haizao's conformist ending suggests that women must not be encouraged to pursue sexual consumption or expression, for it upsets traditional women's virtues and will cause regret in the near future.

However, such narrative closure does not guarantee effective containment of the heated debates about love, sexuality, and infidelity in contemporary China stirred up by Song Siming and Haizao's affair; instead, they become central discussion topics in news reports and discussion forums. Negotiated or oppositional readings from *Narrow Dwelling*'s viewers provide a compelling illustration of Stuart Hall's theorization of audience studies, which positions signs as polysemic and the existence of different reading positions in interpreting signs. In analyzing televisual sign, Hall suggests that a viewer may decode signs through dominant/preferred readings, a negotiated reading position, or an oppositional reading position (1973, 16-8). By zooming in on various common people's responses, I illustrate how a (self-)censored cultural text fails to control audience responses.

Among innumerable online Internet discussions, the entry of Xiaoxiaowenbo (2012), an alleged seventeen-year-old female student from Heilongjiang, summarizes the dilemma women are facing when choosing a lover/sexual partner in a social context in which the attitude of looking-toward money (*xiang qian kan*) has become a dominant value. Expressing her appreciation for the actor Zhang

The image of a masculine career woman, Xie Xiangmei (on the left), in the TV drama, *Close to You, Make Me Warm*, stirred up debates about women's proper gender and social role in reform-era China.

The other woman, Ding Aiyu, in *Close to You, Make Me Warm*, is a tender woman who can easily attract men with her beauty and grace.

Jiayi's skills in playing Song Siming, she highlights her confusion about love in this way,

> ...[I] am angry about Haizao's infidelity, find Xiao Bei's tolerance hopeless, am attracted to Song Siming's gentleness. Definitely, every woman's mind contains a Song Siming: he is gentle, reliable, and cultivated. How can a woman ever resist a man like him? But I have to say, no matter how open-minded the society has become, a mistress will still be despised and destroyed by scandals. The betrayal and infidelity of such an attractive man, after all, violates ethics and morality, and should be criticized. In this vein, my feelings go indeterminately between Song Siming and Xiao Bei...After watching *Narrow Dwelling*, I'm even thinking whether I want Xiao Bei or Song Siming. In the past, I desired a lover like Xiao Bei. We don't have to be rich as long as we're together. We don't need extravagance as long as we're in love. But nowadays love has become impractical. Passionate feelings will be eroded when we try to make ends meet. Perhaps the saying "everything goes wrong for the poor couple" is right (*pinjian fuqi bai shi ai*). Maybe I want a man like Song Siming. [*Narrow Dwelling*'s] ending made me sad. Although I hated Haizao very much when I was in the middle of the narrative, I sincerely pitied her at the end. After serious consideration, I found that such an ending is necessary to uphold morality...However, extra-marital affairs and the other woman (*di san zhe*), sadly, indeed exist...

Xiaoxiaowenbo's confession explains why Song Siming is widely popular although he betrays his wife and family: he is gentle, and more importantly, rich. Despite the fact that Xiaoxiaowenbo points to Song Siming's gentleness as the reason for his status as every woman's dream man, it is far from the ultimate reason, as an economically-humble man can also possess these qualities. The more significant reason lies later in the paragraph when she raised the question of whether or not love can be sustained in poverty. Therefore, the motivation for choosing a man like Song Siming lies in a woman's financial concern, and wealth is the key characteristic that Song possesses.

Xiaoxiaowenbo's personal reflection on an ideal sexual partner drew support and recognition. Another netizen, Xiaoju Jessica, self-identified as a thirty-one-year-old woman from Guangdong, expressed that she would also pick Song Siming if she were to choose between him and Xiao Bei (2012). Xiaoju Jessica explained,

> "love becomes hopeless when caught in reality (*xianshi*). You cannot sustain love with water alone, you also need

If Song Siming were played by Li Yongjian, who is culturally considered as unattractive, Song's sexual advances and passionate acts on behalf of Haizao may have seemed repugnant rather than romantic.

bread."

Putting love in a clichéd dichotomous analogy, Xiaoju Jessica referred to Xiao Bei as water (passion/ideals) and Song Siming as bread (means for survival), implying that the ability to offer material access makes a man preferable to others, and women have to bear this "enlightenment" in mind. Xiaoxiaowenbo replied to Xiaoju Jessica by affirming that the majority of women would make the same choice in a materialistic world.

Narrow Dwelling's moral ending not only captured the attention of Xiaoxiaobowen; it also incited viewers who enjoyed watching Song Siming and Haizao's affair to rewrite the tragic ending. Dissatisfied with the television ending, which conforms to normative moral standards by separating an illicit couple through death, a fan created another ending that saves Song from death after the car accident and allows him to reunite with Haizao(Tongzizhuo 2010). This Internet entry received over one hundred and fifty replies, and almost all of them preferred and appreciated this ending. These netizens regarded Haizao and Song's relationship as legitimate love, and praised Song's deep feelings for Haizao. Though admitting that Haizao is "the other woman," one of the replies went so far to recognize the extra-marital love as sublime (Netizen "60.2.14" 2010). These replies indicate that these viewers are aware of Song Siming's marital status, but they find a transgressive relationship or an extra-marital affair acceptable as long as it involves true love.

However, one of the replies attacked the revised ending and its respondents from a moral standpoint. Netizen 110.6.253 reprimanded the new ending and its advocates as insane and opined that their attitude, in fact, supports those who impose pain on others and destroy their families (2010). Written in opposition to online discussions listing ten reasons to love Song Siming(Feiwen shaonü 2009), this "moral" response belongs to one of the voices urging women to choose the "right" path For example, a netizen with the pseudonym Xiaomonuyiran reminded young women of the pain and consequences of becoming the other woman: being an underground lover (*dixia*

qingren), not being able to form a family, having to please the married master. Xiaomonüyiran, therefore, suggests that we should endorse freedom in the private life but condemn an irresponsible private life (2010). Zhang Jiayi, the actor who played Song Siming, also encouraged real women to select a sexual partner who is reliable, more like Su Chun in the television drama, instead of choosing one akin to Song Siming. He also advised women to earn their own benefits rather than taking a short cut to a cozy life, like the one Haizao had taken (Chen 2009).

These intense debates hint at a continuous reconfiguration and conflicting ideologies of love and marriage. A few years before *Narrow Dwelling*'s broadcast, we saw debates about women's proper gender and social role in reform-era China alongside the airing of the television drama *Kaojin ni, wennuan wo* (Close to you, make me warm, 2006) which features both a masculine career woman and a tender "other woman" (Hackenbracht 2009). The discussion, which revolved around whether an ideal woman should be balanced, seemed to reach a fever pitch when online articles proposed that women should act like a *baigujing* (white bone demon) at work and a *hulijing* (fox fairy) at home (Xiaofeng chanyue 2006). The term *baigujing*, made famous in the Ming masterwork *Journey to the West*, here means "white collar"(*bailing*) , "backboned" (*gugan*), and "elite" (*jingying*), while the term *hulijing*, which originally refers to an evil fox spirit, means a tender woman who can easily attract men with her beauty and grace. *Narrow Dwelling*'s role as a big hit turned the focus of debates about women to the legitimacy of becoming a mistress of rich men for the sake of financial security. The terms *xiaosan* or *ernai* (both mean mistress) have received more discussion since then, and these two words connote significations that are far more morally transgressive than the contemporary *hulijing* and *baigujing* suggest, as the former indicates crossing the legal boundary of marriage.

Although I have shown off-screen opinions that support sexual/marital transgression, I reserve the possibility that the stardom of Zhang Jiayi and Li Nian, the actress who played Haizao, helps to beautify an extra-marital affair on the screen, causing its viewing advocates to see little or no wrong in the illicit relationship. Zhang Jiayi's appearance is attractive and Li Nian looks innocent. If Song Siming were played by an actor who is culturally considered ugly, such as the small-eyed, buck-toothed Lin Yongjian who played Da Zhuang in *Jin Hun* (Golden marriage, 2007), Song's sexual advances and passionate acts on behalf of Haizao may have seemed repugnant rather than romantic. In the same vein, Li Nian looks pure and innocent, rendering Haizao's character simple-minded instead of sophisticated, the kind of person who rarely aims to become a mistress.

The audience's response is a sign of a fissure in censorship's effectiveness, if not an indication of its failure. After reviewing these audience responses, we can observe that although *Narrow Dwelling*'s moral ending may be a sign of self-censorship or a tactic to pass a censorship system that targets radical representations of sex and love, the spectator's response is uncontrollable.

Conclusion

The three noticeable female protagonists, obscuring direct critique of government corruption, are employed as part of a tactic to pass censorship. Yet, hot debates on housing prices prove that viewers were able to decode critical stances and project and release their resentment in reality. The official responses to *Narrow Dwelling* illustrate the state's flexible reproductive power, which absorbs noise from citizens and sustains the regime. Although *Narrow Dwelling* vents common people's discontent, it ultimately confirms to orthodox sexual morality, thus illustrating a degree of self-censorship. However, viewers' conflicting perceptions of Haizao and her role as a mistress, their disapproval of the moralistic ending, as well as their re-writing of *Narrow Dwelling*'s conclusion prove to us that reader response is lively and creative enough to evade official prediction, censorship, and containment. Perhaps reader response is the core component that can effectively resist or at least negotiate with hegemonic ideology in popular culture.

Go to Notes page

Notes

1. For instance, see Zhu, Keane, and Bai (2008); Zhu, and Berry (2009); Curtin (2007); Zhu (2008); Neves (2011). [return to text]

2. *Narrow Dwelling* has three different versions, according to news articles (Ma and Xu 2009; Gou 2009). Its premier on Shanghai television Drama Channel on July 29, 2009 consisted of thirty four episodes; later it became thirty-three when it arrived on Beijing television channels in November of the same year. We can find the latest censored thirty-three episode version on LeTV or Youku (Chinese mainland websites). LeTV and YouTube, along with *Narrow Dwelling*'s DVD release, advertised an uncut thirty-five episode version. The major differences between the thirty-three and thirty-five versions lie in the sanitization of Song Siming and Haizao's affair. For example, the sanitized version cuts the love scene between Song Siming and Haizao in Episode Thirty, where Song advices Haizao to undergo a physical examination, foreshadowing Haizao's illegitimate pregnancy. In this article, I analyze the version that contains thirty-five episodes. *Narrow Dwelling* is available on the following websites:

- Youku (thirty-three episodes with Chinese subtitles). (accessed Aug 9, 2012). http://www.youku.com/show_page/id_zcc16fae6962411de83b1.html
- Letelevision.com (both thirty-three and thirty-five episode versions). (accessed Aug 9, 2012). http://so.letv.com/s?wd=%E8%9D%B8%E5%B1%85&from=list
- YouTube (thirty-five episodes with Chinese subtitles).(accessed Aug 9, 2012). http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h9FIYmUACZ8

Unfortunately, only the first three episodes were subtitled in English by a netizen and posted on YouTube:

- Episode One: (accessed Aug 9, 2012). http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PTrOWJ_N7Fc
- Episode Two: (accessed Aug 9, 2012). http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cC7Iygw1bic
- Episode Three:(accessed Aug 9, 2012). http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7tY256jSb1o

3. Right before the first broadcast trial on May 1, 1958 (Guo 1991,3; Zhao 2004, 248), the Bureau of Central Broadcast Affairs (the former body of SARFT) announced on April 29, 1958 that the station had to "follow the guidelines and policies of the Party by reflecting current significant national and political events, report the achievements of socialism, publicize scientific and technological knowledge, introduce excellent art-house films, and prepare a number of programs for youngsters and children" (Zhongguo guangbo dianshi chubanshe 1988, 701).

4. As a part of the application procedure for a shooting permit, a production team has to fill out the form and submit it with a synopsis of at least 1500 words to a corresponding administration department. For the whole procedure of applying for a production permit and broadcast permit, see the ordinances announced by SARFT (2008b).

5. In addition to monitoring political ideology of television programs, another possible motivation of SARFT's regulatory forces is economical. Meng Bingchun, scholar of media and communication studies, maintains that SARFT creates favorable policies to protect the monopoly position of China Central Television (CCTV) for the purpose of defending its economic interests. Meng reasons that as CCTV turns thirteen percent of its annual income to SARFT, television programs that potentially jeopardize the interests of CCTV and thus that of SARFT may be subject to criticism and/or being banned with similar reasons of moral decline (262-3). For example, when the talent contest show *Super Girl*, produced by an inland provincial television station, Hunan Satellite Television, gripped the whole nation and charged a higher price (RMB 112,500/$ 13, 587) for an ad on the contest's final than the highest CCTV station was able to charge, an official statement from CCTV described the show as "vulgar and manipulative," proposing to cancel the show for its "secularized" values (Meng 261). In fact, SARFT banned *Super Girl* after the final in 2006 and did not approve its revival until 2009. In protecting political ideology or economic interests, moral decline is a shared justification for prohibition of television programs. The controversies appearing in *Narrow Dwelling* are extra-marital affairs and the real estate crisis; therefore, I will focus on its negotiation with censorship and its audience response in terms of those two controversies.

6. Similarly, each episode of *L'Escargot* was one hour long including three sections of commercials, aired every day during weekdays, while its ending was on a Sunday night broadcasting consecutively the twenty-nineth and thirtieth episode. []

7. In this paper, I use "Narrow Dwelling" as the title of the television drama.

8. See Zha (1995, 7-10) for examples of protesting intellectuals turning into businessmen in post-1989 China. []

9. Provincial satellite channels were solely run by state-owned provincial television stations until 2001. Hong Kong-based STAR television, a subsidiary of Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation obtained approval from SARFT to enter the television network in Guangdong Province, a southern coastal region bordering Hong Kong and Macau. The channel was launched in April 2002. At the same time, China Entertainment Television (CETV), currently jointly owned by the Hong Kong based-TOM Group and the United States' TBS Networks, launched its first broadcast in February, 2002. By 2006, around thirty foreign satellite channels had permission to broadcast in China (Lantham 56) while the Hong Kong-based Phoenix Satellite Television Chinese Channel had become popular with cable viewers by the late 1990s. SARFT restricts satellite broadcasts; for example, CETV broadcast is legally limited to mainly Guangdong Province. But in fact, there are more than 400 television channel signals received in China (Li, 2007), and residents who illegally install a satellite receiver at home may be able to watch foreign channels. []

10. Numerous netizens (*wangmin*) condemned Li Jingsheng's critisms on the popular Chinese discussion forum bbs1.people.com.cn. For example, netizen [124.131.209

] opined that Li was even more corrupted than the character Song Siming. See bbs1.people.com.cn.

11. There was a claim that *Narrow Dwelling* would be banned from further airing after a suspension of its re-run on the Beijing Youth Chanel in November 2009. However, such a claim proved to be wrong, as the television drama was re-run in 2010 with a much lower profile.

12. Sources for this episode:

- Episodes Thirty-three through Thirty-five are available on YouTube, however, without English subtitle. (all accessed Aug 9, 2012).
- Episode Thirty-three http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6vsPmkhEW7I;
- Episode Thirty-four http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AiGOzE6l1Ms;
- Episode Thirty-five http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nu8swSLndEU

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Digital pleasure palaces: Bollywood seduces the global Indian at the multiplex

by Manjunath Pendakur

This is one of the latest shopping malls in Bengaluru, a fast growing and sprawling city of nearly 10 million people, known for its Information Technology industry. What is special about this mall is that it houses the first multiplex cinema fully owned by Cinepolis, a Mexico-based transnational corporation, that boasts of a partnership with the beverage giant Coca Cola.[1] [open endnotes in new window] The growth of malls and multiplexes in India has been phenomenal. In the 20th Century, there were no indoor shopping malls in the entire country. Only 3 new malls were built in 2001, but in 2005 that number went up to 100 (Zakaria, 2006, p. 37). By 2010, 223 glistening malls arose with 785 cinema screens embedded in them (Adesaria, 2010).

The movie industry in the country started to refer to these venues as places where the "classes" go and the single screen theaters as venues for the "masses." The malls and multiplexes are the latest symbols of a neoliberal India where the masses and the classes are being redefined. Why is this happening now and how are these multiplex cinemas and its audiences affecting India's mammoth film industry? I shall explore these key

questions in this case study by not only looking at the political economy of the film industry but also shifts in the cultural arena. Scholars and students, who are mostly familiar with text/aesthetic/auteur analysis of Indian films, may find this essay useful in better understanding them.

Class and caste

In order to better understand the film audiences and the recent trends and developments in the industry, we have to delve into class and caste in India. Because Indian culture revolves around caste issues, it can be bewildering to the outsiders to understand the intricate ways in which caste weaves into a person's life. Class as a category is about property ownership and some people overcome the odds against them and climb up the class ladder. A person is born into a caste and they may convert to other religions to get rid of their caste identity, but people remember a family's caste history.

Class and caste often intersect in India. While generalizations are difficult because of vast differences from region to region, India is a society that is stratified by class and caste. In certain parts of the country, lower castes have broken through the barriers to attain economic and political power (for example, the Nadars of Tamilnadu and Lingayats of Karnataka). Each community or members of a caste have developed their own cultural practices. There are hundreds of castes and, for the most part, these caste categorizations do not necessarily match up with what people do these days. In other words, with modernization and urbanization caste divisions are somewhat diffused, if not completely evaporated.

Stories and images of China in U.S. news media vary from seeing China as threat or as an economic colossus with pollution, labor exploitation and human rights issues.

Shopping mall in Beijing, China.

Gold jewelry on display at the Grand Bazaar in

Caste is a powerful identity marker. One may rise above their class position by acquiring wealth. It is, however, much harder to erase a family's identity and history. Muslims, Christians, and other minority religious groups are not part of the Hindu caste system. Hindus set aside a whole lot of people as 'untouchables' who are, for all practical purposes, outside the caste system. Indian government outlawed untouchability, however, the stigma is difficult to erase. The former untouchables, who go by the name 'dalit,' constitute about 16% of the total population. They have mobilized under the multiparty political system and are seeking justice and equity legally and politically.

Caste creeps in quickly at critical moments in a person's life, for example, in birth, death and marriage. Indian popular cinema deals with these tricky issues related to caste differences and offers a progressive, egalitarian vision of society. However, a century of "preaching" through cinema for eradicating caste has not had much of an effect on caste and class divisions as they continue to persist in contemporary India.

We know that India's population has grown to about 1.2 billion people. India's Census in 2011 covered 35 States/Union Territories, 640 districts, 5,924 sub-districts, 7,935 Towns and 640,867 Villages (http://censusindia.gov.in/). According to Census data, more than 50% of India's current population is below the age of 25 and over 65% are below the age of 35. About 72.2% of the population lives in some 638,000 villages and the rest 27.8% in about 5,480 towns and urban agglomerations (http://www.indiaonlinepages.com/population/india-current-population.html).

When we compare these data to the 2001 Census, we see that nearly 2,000 villages have disappeared from their count. This is the tip of the iceberg of migration of landless and poor people leaving for bigger towns and cities looking for opportunities. The neoliberal policies since the 1990s have led to an agrarian crisis never seen before. More than 200,000 farmers have committed suicide to escape from poverty and their inability to feed their families. Lack of government subsidies, crop failure due to climate change, corrupt bureaucracy, and global competition driving down prices of agricultural commodities are the reasons for this calamity (http://www.upi.com/Business_News/Energy-Resources/2011/01/06/Crop-failure-impels-Indian-farmer-suicides/UPI-73001294344878/).

In rural areas, where more than 70% of the people still live, a family's class position is directly related to their land ownership. Some landowners are involved in money lending and some are absentee landlords. Those who do not own any land have no choice but to sell their labor power to eke out a living. The land-owning class is divided into four groups—Rich, Middle, Small and Marginal/Tenant. Small peasants are also involved in selling some of their labor power to the other landowning classes, while the Marginal/Tenant farmers have only their labor power to sell (Vakulabharanam et al, 2010, p. 5). In some better developed states such as Karnataka where I grew up, factories in rural India produce various commodities for sale in the cities—rice, cooking oil, sugar, and plastic bags. Such places have workers who are not tied to land.

The middle class (urban and rural)—consisting of property owners of all sizes, traders, officials in the military and the state machinery, teachers, professors, high technology workers in the corporate sector—has grown to about 300 million people. They have disposable incomes that are attractive

Istanbul, Turkey. Photo: M. Pendakur.

West Edmonton Mall, Canada.

Dubai Mall.

Ranjit Theater, single screen cinema in Mysore. Photo: M. Pendakur.

for new investments in leisure and other consumer industries. Skilled workers' average annual salaries in the Information Technology sector are in the range of Rs. 400,000 ($8000) to Rs. 652,000 ($1300). A senior software engineer who works for companies such as Tata Consultancy, InfoSys, or Oracle may earn higher than Rs. 1.1 million a year ($22,000). While that is a lot of money in the hands of a small percentage of the workforce, their salaries are less than what is paid to comparable workers in Singapore and China. In contrast, in the city of Bengaluru, a domestic worker earns monthly a meager Rs. 800 ($16) to Rs. 1500 ($30) for 4-6 hours of work. That person usually goes to 4-5 houses to cook, clean, wash clothes, or do other household chores in order to earn more. Breakfast, lunch, or dinner is usually included. Some of them own scooter and have a cell phone, but owning a house or an apartment is enormously expensive in that city and beyond their reach. Such workers would usually come from outside the city and live with other family members. They are not the clientele for the malls and multiplexes, but they will see movies at a local, single screen theater.

The paradox of rich and poor has existed in India throughout the feudal period and the colonial period and it persists in the modern, democratic India. The wealthy in the country have done splendidly well under the neoliberal regime since 1991. *Forbes* magazine has reported that by 2008 there were 53 US dollar billionaires. They are like the robber barons that sit atop the pyramid of wealth in the country and, in collusion with the state, have plundered the natural resources for private profit. The accumulation of wealth in the rich's hands is unimaginable for most people in the country, as they struggle for one decent meal a day. Mumbai, the epicenter of Bollywood film culture, is the locus of more than 6 million poor people who live in terrible conditions without clean water, sanitation and roads in their communities that are labeled "slums."

Cinema-going experience

To cater to the new consuming classes, the very idea of integrating cinema theaters in malls is relatively new not only in India but also in other parts of the world (Rockstar, 2011). In the past, well to do Indians traveled to Singapore and Hong Kong to experience modern shopping malls. Now they go to Dubai. These massive shopping complexes showcase imported goods, designer clothes, gold ornaments and electronics.[2] The first multiplex cinema (16 screens) appeared in Toronto, Canada at the Eaton Center, a downtown mall back in the late 1970s and immediately after that multiplexes were being included in the malls of other U.S. cities. Chicago, for instance, had one such multiplex in the Water Tower shopping mall and other multiplexes developed in and around suburban areas.

India and China, with more than a billion inhabitants in each, have caught up with the likes of Japan and Singapore. One recent report about China in the Los Angles Times states,

> "Over the last four years, the number of screens in China has doubled to more than 6,200, a figure that's projected to double again by 2015. Box-office receipts hit a record $1.5 billion last year, according to the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television" (Pierson, 2011).

The report further states,

> "The cinema-building binge is powered in part by ideology. The

Young men at a single screen theater. From Bollywood Dreams by photographer Jonathan Torgovnik.

Super Star, Rajinikanth fights greedy capitalists who exploit students, in *Sivaji*: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QSRMSb21KUU

Rain sequences and sexual innuendo.

Communist government is a major investor in film production, distribution and movie houses. Film is a way to strengthen state influence at home and export Chinese culture abroad."

For nearly sixty years after China and India decolonized, news from those two Asian giants was framed in such way their complex societies, their histories, and their economic and political struggles fitted a preordained picture in the Western mind. For instance, the dominant images for India were snake charmers and the emaciated bodies of famine stricken children. The unprecedented economic growth in India, huge pool of scientific labor, spread of urban culture and consumerism changed the dominant media representations starting in the 1990s. Stories and images of China in the news media vary from a major ideological and financial threat to the West's supremacy to an economic colossus that has incredible challenges with pollution, labor exploitation and human rights issues.

In addition to China and India, people in various parts of the developing world are witnessing urban multiplexes. While I am presenting a case study of India's film industry and the various trends and internal battles, *Jump Cut*'s international readers may find it useful to compare the Indian example with their own countries.

Going out to see a movie in India is still a family affair. Parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts and children of all ages make a night out of seeing movies at large, cavernous halls that feature a single screen. This was also the experience of U.S. moviegoers in the 1930s and 1940s. Going out on a date to see a movie was not common until recently. Dating in middle class families, even in urban areas, is still frowned upon. I, however, saw young couples at multiplexes in major cities because the large city gives anonymity to one and all. Arranged marriage is still the norm irrespective of their class and caste. More common are groups of friends—men and women—going to see a movie as a social event. Families enjoy socializing during the intermission.

The single-screen cinema is also a reflection of the class structure because the ticket prices vary depending on how far the patron is sitting from the screen. Those who cannot afford the balcony seats, sit on the main floor. Women can choose to sit separately from men and they can enter from a separate entrance. That is not the case with multiplexes because they are located in urban or suburban settings and draw on a more affluent audience that is also generally college-educated. I saw couples sitting together to watch movies at multiplexes in Bengaluru and Mumbai. In both—single screen and multiplex theaters—the audience is lively. They come ready to respond to what is going on with their favorite stars on the screen. They whistle, clap and even act out their favorite lines and songs from that movie. Cell phones ring during the screening and people do texting also. Some people are annoyed by such behavior and choose not to go to movies in the theaters. Furthermore, to get to a multiplex they have to contend with traffic, noise, pollution and other problems of the big cities, and choose to stay home and watch television.[3]

To appeal to this diverse audience, the Indian producers and directors created a movie "package" with a long narrative, usually running to three hours, punctuated with songs, dances, and unbelievable fights. This form goes back to the early days of cinema and was perfected so to speak after the arrival of sound in the early 1930s.

Government censorship curtailed sexual representations to some extent,

Helen, the queen of seduction, in a club dance scene in *Caravan* (Nasir Hussain, 1971):
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DBCZWNfoR3k

Dance numbers offer color, costume, drama and music.

but producers and directors with political influence have managed the Censor Board to their own advantage. Others devise clever ploys to get around the rules to please the mass audience. Provocative images of women with lots of cleavage exposure, dance numbers that have bump and grind movements, and sexual innuendo in dialogue and song stand in for actual sex on the screen. Rain sequences and the wet sari scene are still common. Each Bollywood film may have what is known as an "item number," a provocative song and dance performed by a woman, often surrounded by drunk men. In the last century, there was always a dance number in a nightclub, represented in the films as a den of illicit liquor, smuggling, and other antisocial behavior. These days, heroines perform such provocative dance numbers.

Directors go to extraordinary lengths and producers spend a sizeable portion of the film's budget to create lavish sets (or go to foreign locations) and employ expensive dancers to fill the sets along with the principal actors. Such scenes are meticulously directed with a great deal of care and attention to color, costume, drama, and movement. These item numbers and other song and dance sequences are highly popular with the audiences. Some patrons see a movie multiple times, just to enjoy the music and dance numbers.

These "elements" that constitute 'entertainment' in a film are like the ingredients in a spicy Indian curry dish or 'masala'. In fact, audiences in India refer to the local films as 'masala movies'; however, in the last ten years the term "Bollywood" has gained currency as a label for this popular film form. It draws heavily from the Indian myths, epics, folk and other cultural traditions. The narrative is not linear, but stories within stories are woven into the plot structure. Melodrama is punctuated with comedy sequences and, in many a film, comedians have a parallel story line along with the heroic struggles of the male protagonist. Kissing is not a taboo any more, although it is generally avoided. The masala film form has persisted through the decades while Bollywood producers have made more genre specific films (horror, comedy, suspense thrillers) that have found an audience in the multiplex theaters. Most of them have song and dance numbers because the mass audience loves music and the film song serves to enhance the narrative as well.[4]

In general, malls and multiplexes have developed in the big cities and are beginning to expand into small cities. Single screen theaters are predominant in small cities at this time and also in district and county towns. As India's capitalist development is uneven, not all areas of the country look the same. The economically backward states lag behind compared to some of the cities and towns that this essay deals with. As can be expected, private capital flows into areas where audiences have purchasing power to buy expensive tickets at the shiny multiplexes.

In 1991, the Indian government abandoned socialism that was the vision and direction set by the nationalist movement to create a more equitable and just society. Instead, the government embarked on the neoliberal path, a radical departure from the "command and control" economy that was led by state control of strategic industries and services to an economy that favored private ownership and control (Das, 2000, 2002). To accomplish this new goal to create a fundamentally different, but a capitalist economy the Central Government revamped some of the laws and created new ones. One such major change was the enactment of the Competition Act, 2002 that is aimed at facilitating a competitive regime for private capital as well

Major star Katrina Kaif dances to an "item number" in a Bollywood film.

as state-owned enterprises. The other action that has had a direct bearing on the film industry is allowing 100% foreign direct investment in all sectors of the fast growing entertainment business. These policies and the new regulatory regime to build a capitalist society are often billed in the media as *India, Inc.* or *India Shining.*

While not all of that has been completed yet and there is widespread concern and opposition to some of these policies and the high level of corruption among the political elite, the signs of 'success' of neoliberal policies have received wide media attention in the West.[5] By these accounts, India is poised to become the third largest economy in the world by 2040 (Zakaria, *Newsweek*, March 2006, p. 35). Michael Elliot of *Time* gushes with the following words,

> "Fueled by high-octane growth, the world's largest democracy is becoming a global power. Why the world will never be the same" (*Time,* June 26, 2006, p. 37).

Another article notes that India has the highest number of billionaires in Asia, "pushing Japan to the No. 2 spot for the first time in 20 years" while pointing to

Young men lined up to buy tickets at a single screen theater. From Bollywood Dreams by photographer Jonathan Torgovnik.

"80% of Indians who live on less than \$2 a day, making India the country with the world's largest number of poor people" (*Time*, 2006, p. 18).

I argue that the structural changes in the film industry must be seen in the larger context of political economic change in India. Otherwise, the meaning of what people experience and whose experience we are talking about will be completely missed. I will also illustrate the impact of how the capitalist state structures the economy favoring one class versus another, and one group of capitalists versus the other, all in the name of serving the public at large. It is crucial to understand the role of the state as a mediator in this globalization process where various sectors of power compete to gain a privileged market position and higher profits.

Size and importance of the film industry

The particularities of how the film industry works in India strike the outsiders as disorganization and chaos. Major stars sign up for dozens of pictures at a time. As such, producers have to scramble to get dates to complete the film. In a star-driven industry, the producers are at the mercy of these 'bankable' names. Entire crews are taken abroad to beautiful locations in Switzerland or other areas of Europe, Australia, Canada, the United States, and South America in order to get every one in one place for extended periods of time to complete principal photography. There is stardom and celebrity status not just for those actors, but also music directors and composers get top billing because popular cinema is studded with songs and dance numbers.

Ramoji Film City is one of the biggest film studios in the country, located on a large estate on the outskirts of the city of Hyderabad in southern India.
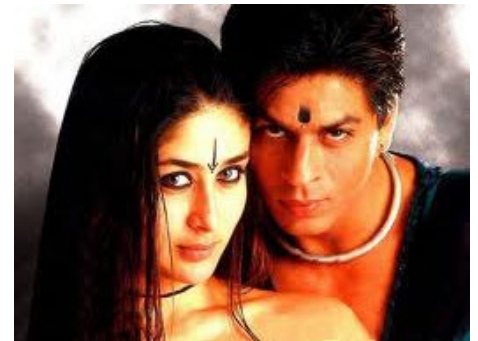
Super Stars of Hindi language cinema:
Salman Khan, Kareena Kapoor, Shahrukh Khan.

Songs are recorded well in advance and releasing an album of those songs is celebrated with pomp and ceremony, just as a film's opening is. Because the Indian moviegoers love music and songs in films and those songs get played on radio stations over and over again, the public is well aware of an upcoming film. Men and women who sing these songs for movies are accorded high status in the industry, just as rock stars do in Western culture.

Until 2000 banks did not loan money to the film industry. That changed

Huge cut-out of Rajkumar on Bengalur's theater row. Photo: M. Pendakur
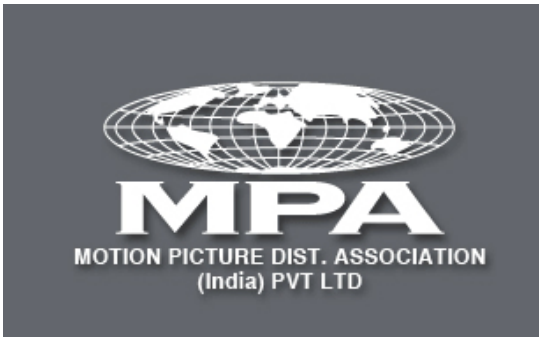
Motion Picture Association of America, the U.S. Majors lobby group, drops "America" from its logo to mask its true identity of being a Hollywood cartel.

Provocative poster for a recent film in Hindi.

soon after when the Indian Central Government recognized film and entertainment as an "industry." Vertically integrated corporations were almost non-existent in production, distribution and exhibition. It was mostly a cash economy, dominated by family-owned businesses and the underworld, which made it nearly impossible to establish how much money was transacted and for what purpose (Pendakur, 2003, pp. 51-55).

None of the agencies of the Central Government provide systematic data on the size of investment, revenues, profits, taxes collected, number of films distributed, tickets sold, and films exported. The same sad state of affairs exists in the industry organizations in the country. The best we can get are estimates. In 2001, the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry estimated the Indian entertainment industry size to be around Rs. 96 billion ($1.95 billion) and projected a steep growth thereafter. Recent estimates suggest that the media and entertainment industry grew by 11 percent between 2009-10, from $12.9 billion to $14.4 billion and was supposed to grow by 13% in 2011 (India in Business, 2012). The film sector's revenues totaled $1.9 billion in 2010 reflecting a decline from the previous year by 6.7%. All projections into the future are, however, rosy based on population growth and projected higher ticket prices. The film industry revenues are expected to reach $2.6 billion by 2014 (India in Business, 2012).

The Motion Picture Association of America's branch in India commissioned a study by the accounting firm Price Waterhouse Coopers that provides another picture of the size of the film industry. The researchers studied Hindi language films and what they call "key regional language films" to come up with their estimates. In 2008, according to this study, the Indian film industry size is estimated at $2.5 billion and was expected to grow by 11.5 percent over the period of 2008-11. The domestic box office accounted for $1.8 billion with overseas box office, ancillary rights, and home video making up the balance (MPDAI, 2010, p. 10). By 2013, domestic box office was predicted to grow to $2.8 billion primarily due to the growth in average ticket prices. Whichever study is chosen for our purposes, it is clear that the revenues are growing and, as we shall see later, ticket prices are also rising.

An estimated 1.4 million workers are employed directly in the motion picture industry in various capacities at the hundreds of studios located in the principal cities of India. The industry creates other jobs related to the core businesses of production, distribution and exhibition. Those jobs amount to approximately 3 million (MPDAI, 2010, p. 4). Trade unions have been around a long time in this sector but they are weak.

More than 1000 feature films are produced in 23 languages, including English (CBFC, 2010). Such a diverse and complex industry was almost impenetrable to Hollywood until the 1990s (Pendakur, 2006, pp. 89-90). With India's borders wide open for Hollywood imports, the number of films that the Hollywood Majors bring in has doubled as are their revenues.[6]

The 12,000 plus screens in the country reportedly sell a lot of tickets but no one can provide an accurate count. *Variety* reported in 2007 that 10 million tickets were sold every day (James, 2007, p. 8). I estimate ticket sales to be at least three to five times that number because the theater owners underreport sales in order to evade taxes. It is especially the case in small cities and rural towns where the theater owner and the distributor's agent collude. They recirculate the tickets from the entrance back to the box office several times for the same show. A more recent report suggests a total of 3.5

Woman purchasing a movie ticket. From [Bollywood Dreams](#) by photographer Jonathan Torgovnik.

billion tickets sold every year and was expected to rise to 4.5 billion by 2011 (Bhushan, 2008).

There are roughly 27 million Indians living outside India, and they love to watch movies on the big screen and acquire DVDs and music CDs. Only the Hindi language cinema has been able to tap into this worldwide audience. As a result, audiences from Nairobi, Kenya to Los Angeles, USA enjoy Hindi language films. More than half the films made in India are produced in the four southern states, and even some Hindi films are made in the south, but Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam films do not play in theatres all over the country or worldwide. They may be shown at morning shows in cosmopolitan cities such as Mumbai or get a wider release in Bengaluru with its diverse film audience. Generally patrons for those films tend to be those specific linguistic communities. In fact, this holds to be true for Indian cinema the world over. Hindi films have had a global audience whereas regional language cinemas remain the domain of specific language groups or cinephiles.

[Go to page 2](#)

A dance scene from *Guru* (Mani Rathnam, 2007)

A mishmash of comedy, fantastic stunts, car chases, and romance.

Production sector

Around 2006-07, foreign investors were "flashing money everywhere," according to Rohan Sippy, a third-generation filmmaker who has watched the industry's financing structure change up close (Sippy, 2009). The current world-wide recession has tempered that enthusiasm to some degree. Intense competition and low barriers to entry characterize the production sector in Bollywood, unlike in Hollywood where six large, transnational corporations dominate practically all aspects of the industry (Paramount, Fox, Universal, Disney, Warner Bros, Columbia Pictures). Hundreds of producers come and go and they tend to be mostly family-owned operations. Big companies, owned by families—Yash Raj Films, Ramoji Film City, Navketan International, Rajshree Productions, and Mukta Arts, Adlabs, etc.—continue to flourish. However, joint ventures and partnerships with foreign companies are reshaping these companies.

With the overhaul of the regulatory regime in 1991, a number of critical changes are shaping up in the production sector. The government of India allowed 100% foreign direct investment in all sectors of the film business. In addition, major banks and other firms with investment money came forward to fund various Bollywood productions. Initial Public Offerings and new entrants with high net worth became involved in film production. The beginning phase of the construction of multiplexes in the late 1990s and their success certainly added confidence to the investors in film production. I will return to the growth and significance of multiplexes later.

One enthusiastic report pointed out that starting 2001, Hindi film production sector received an injection of Rs. 430 million, Rs. 556 million in 2002 (11 projects), and Rs. 1761 million (33 projects) in 2003 (http://www.indianfilmtrade.com/information/financing.php). The reporter further noted,

> "This represents the first definitive (and meaningful due to number and quantum of films involved) shift in the growth of organized film financing for the Hindi film industry, a trend which is likely to sustain & grow over the coming years."

By 2010, there were a number of venture capital companies in India that were supplying funds for Hindi film production. Notable among them were Cinema Capital Venture Fund and Vistaar Religare Film Fund, both domestically owned and registered companies, had a corpus of Rs. 3500 million (Jariwala, 2010, p. 2).

The initial euphoria of making high profits from the film business may be receding in the last two years. As the failure rate is high--around 85% of the films released flop in the theatrical markets--investors quickly learn that returns are seldom guaranteed. Box office failure for a film generally means negative impact on revenues in ancillary markets such as television rights, cable, satellite, DVD sell-through, and international markets. One major venture capital firm, Cinema Capital Venture Fund, headed by Samir
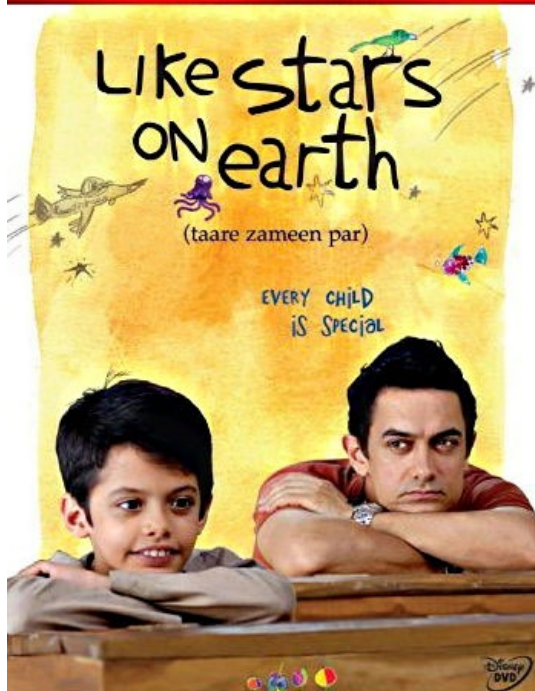
Tar e zameen par: Disney bought the home video rights for this film which debuted Aamir Khan as a director.

Gupta, backed eight Hindi films. Their slate included, *All the Best* (2009), a multi-starrer with Ajay Devgan in the lead role. It is a mishmash of comedy, fantastic stunts, car chases, and romance. Gupta, however, says that the experience of funding film productions where costs cannot easily be controlled has given him and his venture capital industry certain reservations. He asserts that equity deals are not as preferable as debt and bridge financing (Chaudhary, 2011, p 8). or investing in prints and advertising where the equity or institutional investors are positioned at the top of the revenue stream.

There is a good deal of concern among institutional investors because they have also learned that the film business is not a transparent industry. One media consultant who did not want to be named pointed out,

> "With funding available from unaccountable channels and top producers not needing institutional capital, investors will have to keep looking for ways where they can invest capital and generate returns" (Chaudhary, 2011, p. 8).

In sum, Bollywood film financing is not yet an organized industry although the government policy of opening the doors for foreign direct investment and encouraging bank and equity finance have had a visible impact on the flow of money into the business. With high levels of corruption in the country and a thriving underground economy, there is plenty of private, untaxed money that is flowing into the film industry.

Transnational corporations involved in production, distribution, and exhibition on the global level entered the production market by way of joint ventures with Indian capitalists. These corporations simply wanted a piece of the vast market in India where more than 95% of the box office goes to Indian language films. They had tasted success with Hollywood imports hitting the jackpot with the Indian audiences in 2007 and the euphoria spilled into making investments in production also. In 2007, for instance, *Casino Royale* (a Bond thriller) and *Spider-Man 3* were hits with the Indian audiences. Sony Pictures opened *Spider-Man 3* with 588 prints -- 261 in Hindi, 162 in English, 78 in Tamil, 81 in Telugu and 6 in Bhojpuri -- the maximum number of prints for any foreign movie until then. This strategy of dubbing films into local languages expanded the potential market for Hollywood cinema into rural towns (Valsan, 2007). According to Sony, it paid off in a big way by making *Spider-Man 3* the most successful Hollywood film at the box office in the country's history with a total of $17 million.

Sony Pictures Entertainment went further by producing Saawariya (Hindi, 2007). With the highly successful Sanjay Leela Bhansali directing it, Sony distributed it worldwide through its wholly owned subsidiary, Columbia Pictures. This is the first time that a Hollywood Major financed and distributed a film made for Indian audiences at home and abroad. The Walt Disney Company co-produced and released *Roadside Romeo* (2008),

a full-length animated film with Yash Raj Films. Disney also bought the home video rights for Aamir Khan's directorial debut *Taare Zamin Par* (2007) for release in the US. The following year, Disney proceeded to build a stronger presence in the Indian market by buying a strategic 32.1% equity stake in UTV Motion Pictures in Mumbai for about $230 million in 2008. At the time, it was considered the largest foreign investment in the Indian media and entertainment sector. This investment also gave Disney a 15% stake in UTV's broadcasting unit UTV Global Broadcasting Ltd. (UGBL), which operated the kids channel Hungama TV and the youth oriented Bindass TV, Bindass Movies and UTV World Movies.

Warner Bros released *Chandni Chowk to China* (2009), made in partnership with Ramesh Sippy, a major producer-director in Mumbai. Fox STAR Studios has a joint venture with Vipul Shah for a multiple film production deal. The box office results from *Roadside Romeo* and *Saawariya*, however, have not matched the enthusiasm shown by the Hollywood Majors (Bhatia, 2010).

Production costs soared in the new millennium. Available data indicate that in 2006, these films were hugely successful:

- *Krrish (*Rakesh Roshan*, Hindi), an action/adventure film,
- *Lage Raho Munna Bhai (*Rajkumar Hirani, Hindi*), a comedy,
- *Fanaa (*Kunal Kohli, Hindi*), a story set in the context of terrorism,
- *Rang de Basanti (*R. Om Prakash Mehra, Hindi*), a film recalling the anti-imperialist struggle against the British set on a college campus in Delhi,
- *Phir Hera Pheri (*Neeraj Vohra, Hindi*), a comedy,
- *Don* (Farhan Akhtar, Hindi)and *Gangster* (Anurag Basu, Hindi), both urban mafia stories.

As many as six films grossed over Rs. 400 million each ($8 million), two of which went over the Rs. 600 million ($12 million) mark. *Lage Raho Munna Bhai* was a mega box office hit approaching the Rs. 700 million mark ($14 million) (Joshi, 2006, p. 74). In 2011, this trend has continued where films with big stars and high budgets ranging from Rs. 600 million ($12 million) to Rs. 1350 million ($27 million) performed exceedingly well. *Body Guard*, with another Superstar of Hindi Cinema, Salman Khan reportedly cost Rs. 600 million ($6 million) to make but grossed Rs. 2.2 billion ($44 million).

Even *Delhi Belly*, featuring Imran Khan, a new comer who is related to the Superstar Aamir Khan, was a huge success with urban audiences in multiplexes. It was budgeted at Rs. 250 million ($5 million) and reportedly grossed Rs. 895 million ($17.9 million). *Ra.One* featuring Shahrukh Khan, another Superstar of Hindi cinema, with its expensive special effects cost Rs. 1350 million ($27 million) and grossed Rs. 1920 million ($38.4 million) (http://www.novinovi.com/box-office-hits-bollywood-2011/).

Corporatizing the production sector and bringing 'discipline' to the way films are produced in India has not proceeded along the lines that were enthusiastically promoted by the champions of efficiency at university business schools and Central Government officials. As long as there is unaccounted money from all sectors of the Indian economy, especially land sales, construction, gold, diamonds, drugs, import and export trade, financiers will continue to come to the film industry where illegally made profits can be laundered.

Distribution and exhibition

Just as competition is the hallmark of production, distribution and exhibition markets are still highly competitive. No single company dominates distribution and exhibition. Unlike in the U.S.-Canada markets, where a small number of large vertically integrated corporations lord over the market, many family-owned companies are involved in distribution and exhibition. Entry barriers do not exist for newcomers with money capital from other sectors of the economy or from the parallel economy. There are national distributors for Hindi language cinema and regional ones for other language films. In the recent years, big Indian-owned corporations have entered this field and are changing the game.

Distributors want to gain as much screen time as possible in key markets where audiences for their films may exist. However, given that the country does not yet have sufficient number of theaters, competition to get screen time is fierce among distributors.

This major Bollywood production-distribution company entered the U.S. market in the 1990s by setting up offices to exploit the vast market of South Asians who are hungry for good quality entertainment from home.
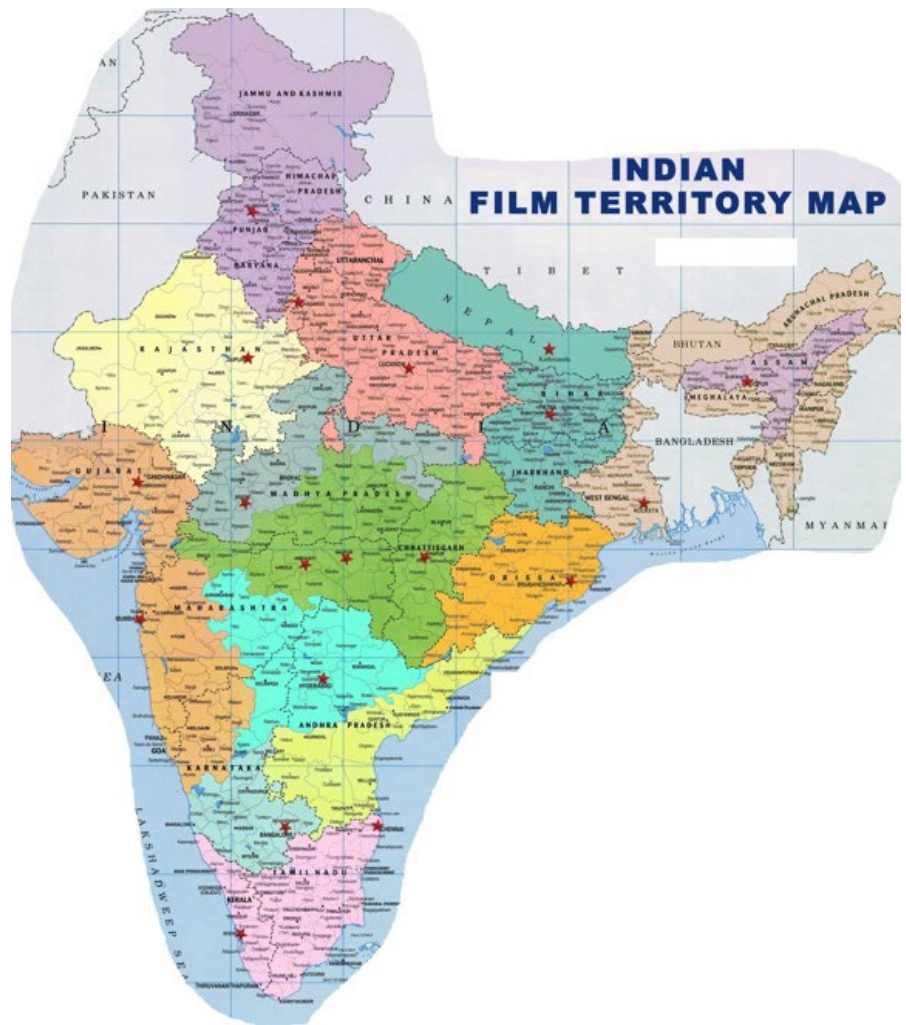
Distribution and exhibition patterns for Hindi cinema are changing somewhat but what remains is as follows. The country is divided into six zones, often called distribution territories. The seventh zone is the global market and more will be said on that market later in this paper. The six domestic territories are composed of:

- Mumbai: Parts of Maharashtra, Gujarat and Karnataka.
- Delhi: Uttar Pradesh, Uttaranchal and National Capital Region.
- East Punjab: States of Punjab, Haryana and Jammu and Kashmir.
- Eastern Circuit: States of West Bengal, Bihar, Jharkand, Nepal, Orissa and Assam.
- Central India and Rajasthan
- South: This is made up of four sub-territories—Naizam, Mysore, Andhra and Tamil Nadu. Naizam includes parts of Andhra Pradesh and south Maharashtra, while Mysore includes Bengaluru and those parts of Karnataka that are not part of the Mumbai territory. The Andhra territory consists of the remaining parts of that state while Tamil Nadu comprises the whole of the state as well as Kerala. (Bose, 2006, 147-148)

These six domestic zones have been further fragmented into 14 territories in the last few years as costs of production went up and acquisition costs for distributors also rose (KPMG Report, 2010, p. 23). In each major territory, there are 15-20 distributors who vie for the films that they perceive to have the greatest success in the exhibition market. What drives the perception is the buzz created by the publicity and promotion surrounding a particular film, the team behind a film including the star

Single screen Shanti Theater, Chennai, 'A' Center. Photo: M. Pendakur.

Single screen theatre in a 'B center. Photo: M. Pendakur.

Touring theater.

cast, director, production company and music director. A Hindi film's success or failure in the Mumbai territory usually determines the price a film can command in other territories in the country.

High acquisition costs should reduce competition and drive out independents. However, that is not the trend in India. While many large corporate entities have emerged—Big Cinemas, PVR Cinemas, UTV Motion Pictures, Eros International—they have not been able to monopolize control over the supply of films. Independents still have a lot of competitive edge in the distribution business because money supply is abundant into the film industry that promises 'gold' with high rates of return. The glamor of being involved in a highly visible, star-studded industry and the parallel economy are the other reasons for the continued existence of independents.

In each territory, distributors classify cities and towns as A, B, and C centers based on population data. In other words, big metropolitan cities with a population of one million and above—such as Bengaluru, Chennai, New Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata—are given the status of 'A' centers. Nearly a hundred cities in the country have that honor. 'B' centers are cities that have 100,000 and above populations and 'C' centers are smaller towns that may have one or two single-screen cinema halls and serve a population below the 100,000 mark.

There are still parts of the country that have no theatres at all. Those who live in those areas may go to a town for work or trading purposes and also see a movie. Or a touring theater may come around during the off-monsoon season.

In 1997, there were a total of 12,772 theatres in the country, 8886 of which were permanent cinema halls, also called hardtops, and 3918 were touring cinemas (Pendakur, 2003, 21). There was a steady decline in the number of screens, although total population grew in that decade and surpassed the one billion mark. By 2006, the total number of screens in the country had reached a low point of 11,183, which meant 10.2 screens per million persons. By this measure, in comparison to other major film producing countries in the world—U.S., Japan, France, Germany, Italy, U.K., and Spain, India was at the bottom of the list (Chitrapu, 2008, p. 122.). In the last decade, multiplexes and digital cinemas appeared and became a new, competitive force and added a novel way in which movies are being shown in the country. More will be said on that later in this section.

Unlike the first run, second run, third run patterns of release in the US-Canada markets, the distributors in India release films first in the big metros, then in the district towns, and then followed by the small towns. In effect, it would take a few weeks or months before a print reaches a rural 'C' center, and seldom in a good condition. Cities such as Bengaluru and Chennai have hundreds of theatres with 800-1000 seats. Within the city, however, distributors do not treat all theatres equally. Theatres which are air conditioned and have digital sound technology and are located in upwardly mobile areas of the city may get a new film to play earlier than the others which are near bus stands and poverty stricken areas. This is akin to the first run and second run classification that we find in the US-Canada markets.

In small towns or C centers, the front rows are no more than a hard bench. When the sales are good, the theatre owner can pack more people in by adding more benches. Ticket prices vary widely depending on the city,
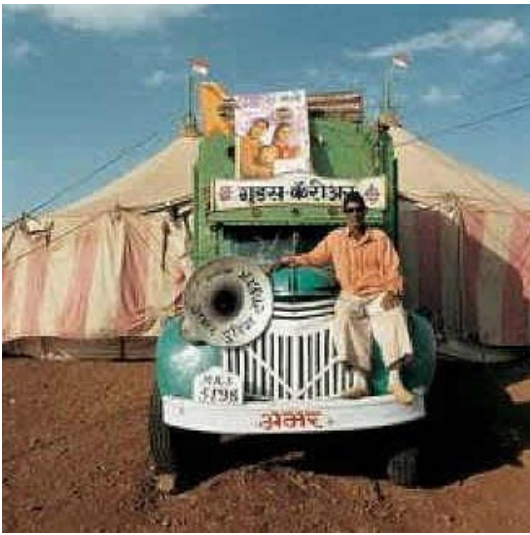
Prints take a long time to arrive in a rural area and are not in good condition.

Setting up large projection reels in a rural area. From Bollywood Dreams by photographer Jonathan Torgovnik.

town, village setting as well as the kind of technological environment (digital sound system, for instance) or comfort (push-back seats, air conditioning, etc.). In many theatres, women have separate entrances and feel safer to sit separately from men because of groping incidents. Well to do families, however, sit together in the balcony area. These practices are different in multiplexes as we will learn later.

Typically, a Hindi film producer sells the film to territorial distributors, often before the picture is completed. This way, the producer can get an advance towards the delivery of a certain number of prints at a certain time. In this method of production and distribution, the producer spreads the risk among a number of territorial distributors because they are in essence willing to place a hold on a film by taking a risk on the film. They are richly rewarded if the film is a box office hit.

The trade practices that are in vogue between the distributors and exhibitors are generally as follows: (a) minimum guarantee, (b) fixed rental, and (c) percentage deal.

- In the *minimum guarantee deal*, the distributor extracts a minimum amount of money from the exhibitor whether or not the film makes any money. The exhibitor may have to pay a sum of money as an advance towards the total to secure the release of a film. As can be imagined, this practice of minimum guarantee comes into play with a film that is perceived to have high chances of being a hit and exhibitors in a specific market compete vigorously to acquire the film.
- In the *fixed rental deal*, the distributor pays a specific amount of money per week to rent the theatre for a specific number of screenings. The exhibitor bears no risk at all in this case and the rent is based on market specifics such as seating capacity, operating expenses, and an assured profit margin. There is, however, no gain from a box office hit because the exhibitor does not take any risk in a fixed rental deal.
- In the *percentage deal*, details can be complicated and often murky. The box office revenue is divided between the exhibitor and the distributor based on a sliding scale. The share is the highest favoring the distributor in the first few weeks. The exhibitor begins to take an advantageous position if the film has staying power beyond a specified number of weeks.

In C centers, exhibitors prefer the fixed rental. They collect the box office revenue, take their cut and hand over the rest of the funds, if any, to the distributor (Gangavathi, 2006, 2007). If the picture bombs, then the distributor will owe money on the contract which would have to be settled. Distribution and exhibition industries are experiencing substantial changes with the arrival of multiplexes and digital cinemas to which we turn now.

Multiplexes: mass entertainment for the elite

Two competing scenarios are playing out in the Indian theatrical market these days—rapid growth of mall-based multiplexes and single screen theatres going through digital conversion. These new theaters not only have set the high standard for luxury viewing conditions but also compete vigorously for new films. With higher ticket prices than the single screen theaters, multiplex profits are higher and, as a result, their market power would grow. As we will see, a tug of war developed between the multiplexes and producer-distributor groups for sharing box office revenues.

As noted earlier, not only was there a severe shortage of theatres but also the total numbers were on the decline. The archaic regulations and bureaucratic stranglehold on exhibition and lack of foreign direct investment are often noted as the reasons. While the bureaucracy remains corrupt, new corporate entities have emerged to take advantage of the availability of venture capital and also the growing demand for entertainment from the burgeoning population of young people.

The expansion of the economy, especially in the cities and towns, has been remarkable. Government investments in infrastructure (mass transit, airports, sea ports) and doubling of salaries for government employees fueled job growth and consumer spending. That in turn has resulted in a housing boom all over the country. Western corporations' outsourcing information technology work, Call Centers, and other back office labor contributed to overall growth in the service industries. Employees of these companies are the primary consumers at malls and multiplexes because of their higher purchasing power compared to domestic workers, farmers,

PVR Cinemas at Forum Mall, Bengaluru, Photo: M. Pendakur

PVR cinema.

Luxurious seats at PVR multiplex, Bengaluru.

and other low wage jobs. While the US economy and the Euro zone have experienced a series of economic crises after 2007 and recovery has been slow and painful, India escaped it all. Wages have risen sharply (so is inflation) and also spending on luxury goods, travel, and entertainment.

Shopping mall growth has been meteoric. More than a dozen cities including Delhi, Bengaluru, Pune, Mumbai, Kolkata, Hyderabad and Chennai are the sites for the development of attractive shopping malls with multiplexes embedded in them. Given the demand for leisure and entertainment in India, it made perfect economic sense to include high end multiplexes in these new shopping malls. The average ticket price in multiplexes in 2007 was in the range of Rs. 130 ($3) to Rs. 200 ($4); by 2010, the range shifted upwards to Rs. 180-280 on weekdays ($3.50-$5.25) and Rs. 280-Rs. 350 on weekends ($5.25-$7).

Six national chains of multiplexes emerged by 2010 with a substantial number of screens in their control:

- Big Cinemas (500 screens)[7][open endnotes in new window]
- Cinemax (94 screens)
- Fame Cinemas (95 screens)
- Fun Cinemas (81 screens)
- Inox (147 screens)
- PVR (142 screens) (Sethi, 2010).

These mall/multiplex builders have also partnered with global corporations such as

- MacDonalds,
- Diva Café (an Italian corporation),
- Pizza Hut,
- Coca Cola,
- Seagrams,

and national corporations such as

- Café Coffee Day,
- Shopper's Stop,
- Barista LavAzza, a coffee company,
- Pantaloons, a clothing company, and
- Nirula's Icecream.

The forecasts of growth since the advent of malls and multiplexes in India have been largely proven accurate with further expansion planned in this decade by mall and multiplex builders.[8]

The revenues of these multiplex chains have also been growing according to their annual reports and media coverage, which spells further consolidation of the exhibition industry. In February 2010, Inox bought a majority stake in its rival chain, Fame India, for Rs. 664.8 million ($13 million), thereby making Inox India's No. 2 multiplex chain. It was reported that the combined operation would result in 55 multiplexes with 204 screens in all (Nagaraju, 2010). Big Cinemas also increased its

Gold Class seating: waitresses dressed like stewardesses serve food and drink.

Going to the mall provides a family outing. ...

"My kids love movies, there is a gaming zone for me, and my wife indulges in shopping."

investment in Fame to 11%. Such horizontal integration was to be expected given the market and revenue growth as well as the fact that existing laws do not prohibit or even limit such industry concentration.

To further understand the operations of the multiplexes, we will take a look at two major competitors in the business—INOX Leisure Limited and PVR Cinemas, both of which have a strong presence in Bengaluru, known for its high technology industry jobs with a population of nearly 10 million. PVR Cinemas is certainly a trailblazer in the multiplex theatre business in India. Entering the industry in 1997,[9] the PVR multiplex circuit has grown to 33 cinemas with 142 screens, located in some of the fastest growing cities of India, which include Delhi, Faridabad, Gurgaon, Ghaziabad, Noida, Mumbai, Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Lucknow and Indore.

PVR introduced such innovations as Cinema Europa, Gold Class, and online ticket booking, all of which attract an elite class of viewers who are willing to pay high prices. Gold Class tickets cost Rs. 500 ($10) and Cinema Europa, depending on the time of day, may cost between Rs. 130-180 ($2.50-$3.50). At its largest operation to date, the PVR Cinemas in Bengaluru had 11 screens with a total of 2016 seats and were showing some 19 different films at different times of the day. The first exclusive Gold Class auditorium with plush, reclining seats, where young women dressed like airhostesses served food and drinks, became an attraction.

It is important to emphasize the great diversity of content available at the PVR multiplexes. Big budget Hindi films, regional language films in Telugu, Kannada and Tamil, and even small-budget films made by new directors are finding access to the market. Such successful Hollywood films as *Blood Diamond* (2006), *Spiderman-3 (2007)*, *Avatar* (2009) vied for audiences with Hindi and Kannada films at PVR Cinemas in Bengaluru. [10] That is a remarkably positive development for Indian cinema because new talent finds many opportunities in such an environment.

Others were not far behind in what is a highly profitable business. INOX Leisure Limited, a subsidiary of Gujarat Flurochemicals, Ltd., entered the multiplex market around 2002 and grew by 2010 to 39 multiplexes with 147 screens in 26 cities (Inox Leisure, Ltd., Annual Report, 2010-11, p. 15). In this highly competitive atmosphere, some of these multiplex chains are attempting to provide what they call "pre-movie" and "post-movie" watching experience. Some of these swanky theaters also offer other entertainment facilities such as bowling alleys, karaoke centers, ice-skating rinks, kid zones, gaming zones, snooker tables, eating stalls, and book stores. The game changer is the variety of foods offered for sale compared to the experience at single screen theaters. One reporter wrote recently:

> "Gone are the days when, while waiting in the lobby for the show to start, or during the interval, you were excited to get to the samosas, the pastries and cold drinks, and if you were lucky, some oily popcorn at the cinema canteen. The food in most up market multiplexes is as snobbish as the place that serves it, and young India is happy to be part of this snob club" (Shimpi, 2010).

Planned are Cine Diners with gourmet food.

PVR's Director's Cut Theater, Delhi.

During my several visits to India in the last 15 years, one critical change in how families spend their time is the visit to the mall. Families go to the mall to simply hang out, a sort of a community get together, and wander around. The multiplex is part of this comfortable space to eat, see a movie together, and eat some snacks. One regular visitor to the mall was quoted as having said,

> "Multiplex has become a comfortable and perfect weekend hangout for my family, with movies, gaming zones, and a mall. My kids love movies, there is a gaming zone for me, and my wife indulges in shopping. Rather than traveling amid the traffic, it is better to get everything under one roof." (Shimpi, 2010)

The multiplex operators are taking the concept of high-end cinema to a new level now by building uber-luxury theaters to go hand in hand with the construction of luxury real estate developments. These small theaters seat about 25 patrons and are rented to special gatherings of families or friends. At PVR's Director's Cut in Delhi, opened in 2011, patrons get 5-star comfort and also a chance to meet their favorite filmmakers. Ajay Bijli, the founder of PVR Cinemas, stated,

> "While formalizing the concept for Director's Cut, we constantly asked ourselves what we can offer to the affluent Indian who owns the best of gadgets and home theatres, so that they can come out for a unique movie-viewing experience" (Ambwani, 2011).

For instance, at the screening of *Rockstar* (2011), director Imtiaz Ali was present, to meet and answer questions from the audience after the film's screening. This is what art movie houses or university film departments used to do in the US and Canada. As we can expect, ticket prices are higher at these luxury theaters but the food is the most important factor and the trickiest. The menus have to be innovative and also be easy to eat while watching a movie. Ashish Saksena of Big Cinemas pointed out this fact about serving food,

> "One cannot serve curries or strong-smelling food to the consumer while they are watching a movie."

In their Cine Diner and 180 Degrees, two new luxury theater brands, that are set to open in Mumbai, patrons will find round tables, sofas, full course dinners with a movie. Ticket price will be Rs. 500-800 ($10 to $16), not including food.

Following PVR's success in this niche market, Big Cinemas, Cinepolis and Inox have announced plans to build luxury multiplexes with 25-48 seats and gourmet food offerings. As one analyst remarked, "Such formats work well in places with high economic disparity" and PVR's founder Mr. Bijli agreed by saying,

> "One-size-fits-all strategy cannot be used in a country with

demographic disparity."

In other words, with such a large number of rich as well as middle class people who love the movies, differentiating them into various types of luxury movie viewing experiences and letting them splurge makes perfect economic sense.

Urbanization and a growing middle class, the under-screened market in the country as well as growth in the number of films made are the crucial factors that attract investment into this sector. Allowing 100% foreign direct investment into the film industry also helped in attracting capital from outside the country. The first to enter India's exhibition market is the Mexico-based Cinepolis that announced an ambitious plan to build theaters in 40 Indian cities:

> "We will make India the country with our largest presence outside Mexico. We will open around 500 screens in the next seven years and for every screen, we will be spending around $700,000 ("Mexican multiplex chain Cinepolis forays into India," *Business of Cinema*, 2011).

It is noteworthy that globally Cinepolis operates over 2000 screens with revenues of approximately $675 million a year. Its entry into the growing Indian market for theatrical film audiences will certainly heat up competition for product from within and outside India among the multiplex theater operators.

The mall, however, is the ideal tribute and a perfect symbol of the fast globalizing India. All the major international labels in clothing, watches, luggage, shoes, etc. could be found in a very comfortable, air-conditioned, cocoon like setting. As in an airport, there is a security checkpoint at each

Lido Cinema in Mysore showing a Kannada film.
Photo: M. Pendakur.

Shalimar Theater, Mysore. Photo: M. Pendakur.

Ajit Kumar with the audio equipment. Photo: M. Pendakur.

entrance to the mall. Uniformed, private security guards walk around the floors. There are no beggars, no traffic noise, no air pollution, no smelly sidewalks, and no "undesirable" crowds as we would find them on the streets outside. In other words, the air-conditioned mall offers a safe haven from the real India.

At the Forum Mall in Bengaluru, PVR Cinemas occupy an entire floor. As they don't provide any seats for the patrons who are waiting to get into the theatre, many young couples sit on the steps to watch others walking by. The best part of the Forum Mall for me was the food court. Unlike the low-end food that is common in the malls of the USA, the Forum food court had specialized Indian, Chinese, and other restaurants.

To contrast the multiplex against a single-screen theater, I will turn to Mysore, considered a second-tier city. Mysore has a population of almost three million and was once home to a tribute-paying vassal king of the British Empire. It is also known for its tourist attractions and a relatively slow-paced life compared to Bengaluru. Mysore has grown in the last ten years. Some of the major information technology companies built their operations in that city as land prices were much lower than in Bengaluru and the city is filled with research centers and other educational institutions. For instance, InfoSys, one of India's leading information technology companies established the InfoSysU campus, a $120 million corporate training facility. Every year 15,000 engineering graduates are selected from a national competition to learn the InfoSys way of doing business and go through a rigorous 12 month education program[11] (Schlosser, 2006). Those who succeed are automatically given a junior engineer position with InfoSys. Between 2001 and 2011, Mysore city's population grew by 13.39 percent from 2.6 million people to 2.9 million, which constituted almost 5% of the population of the state of Karnataka. This growing city craves for movies and patronizes films in several languages.

Mysore has 17 hardtops, two of which are twins or two screen multiplexes. Two shopping malls have been built in the last four years with multiplexes. I interviewed Ajit Kumar and his son, Sanat, who are a theatre-owning family. They are pioneers in the business and their company's history is emblematic of the changes facing the exhibition industry in the country. Ajit's grandfather ran a tent theatre called, *Olympia* 80 years ago. One of their theatres in the city of Mysore is still named after that first theatre. At one point, Ajit's father, Veerendra Kumar, controlled 11 theatres in Karnataka including partnerships in Davanagere, a 'B' center. The family built the *Lido* in Bengaluru in 1965, the first 70mm theatre in the entire country and followed it with the *Lido* in Mysore with 856 seats. Olympia had 584 seats and they built *Shalimar* in 1972. They are operating Lido and Olympia but *Shalimar* was closed in the last decade.

The family had big plans for using the 1.5-acre land around *Shalimar* to build the first shopping mall in Mysore with a multiplex. Like the other malls in the country, this would also have to be a multi-story building, not the sprawling malls we see in the United States. This multiplex was to have 5 screens, each with about 250 seats. The estimated cost for the mall with a multiplex was Rs. 800 million ($16 million). As I toured this old relic of a theatre and the surrounding property with Sanat, I asked if they had found investors for this venture. Sanat said that they are looking for a joint venture with a foreign corporation to build, a possibility that exists only due to the relaxation of rules governing foreign direct investment. The proposed mall, however, never got built as others beat them to this game.

Linguistic diversity of Karnataka is helpful to Ajit Kumar's economic situation. With patrons clamoring for the latest films in Hindi, Kannada, Tamil films, and the fact that there is competition among the distributors to enter the marketplace, exhibitors have an upper hand. The *Lido* plays Hindi and Kannada films whereas *Olympia* some times plays English films also (for example, Harry Potter films). The Kumars have upgraded their theatres with advanced digital sound technology, speakers, and other equipment for which they spent Rs. 3,200,000 ($60,000) each.

Olympia Theatre projectionist. Photo: M. Pendakur.

I wondered why such a heavy investment would pay off. Ajit Kumar responded by an optimistic analysis of the market. While the cinema audience declined with the arrival of television during the 1980s and its subsequent expansion in the country (Pendakur, 1989), exhibitors are noticing a big change in film consumption. "People are coming to watch movies on the big screen," Ajit noted. I think the growing number of young people having money in their hands and lack of privacy in their homes where large families live under one roof are plausible reasons for this growth in cinema attendance.

Profitability to the theatre owners is high in this market because there are no advances and minimum guarantee deals, as is the case in some of the suburban theatres of Bengaluru. In Mysore, it is all fixed rental business. The distributor pays a fixed sum of money every week to the exhibitor. Labor costs are also lower compared to Bengaluru. For instance, a projectionist with ten years experience is paid only Rs. 2000 ($40) a month. Trade unions have not developed in the exhibition industry. None of Ajit's theatres in Mysore have been converted to digital projection yet and they did not seem to be keen on it. Many exhibitors are still reluctant to invest in these new technologies and, to understand the reasons, we will examine the case of two theatres in a 'C' center, about 150 miles from Bengaluru.

Digital cinema houses: a new turn?

From [Bollywood Dreams](#) by photographer Jonathan Torgovnik.

While the Hollywood Majors (Disney, Fox, Paramount, Sony Pictures Entertainment, Universal, and Warner Bros.) were unsure of what technical standard to adopt for digital cinema exhibition in the beginning of the last decade, Indian entrepreneurs moved ahead with digitalization of theatres with imported technology from the US and Europe. The Society of Motion Picture and Television Engineers (SMPTE), a US organization, had been working on a digital standard for cinema production and exhibition technology as early as 2000. The US Majors, however, decided that it was too slow a process and established their own company called Digital Cinema Initiatives (DCI) in 2002. They wanted DCI to come up with a standard quickly that the Majors could impose on the industry worldwide. DCI published their specifications in 2005, which were later approved by SMPTE.

*Krrish (*Rakesh Roshan, Hindi, 2006) was an Indian blockbuster.

The Majors started to push for the installation of digital projection technologies that met the DCI standard in 2007-2008, however, that did not receive an enthusiastic response from the larger theater chains in the US because per screen conversion costs were between $60,000 - $100,000. The US economic meltdown of 2007 became a major obstacle to secure the capital needed to make this big, expensive change. The Majors, however, came up with a way to subsidize digital conversion of theaters by providing a fee to each digital screening from their savings in not doing celluloid prints any more. Called the Virtual Print Fee, it has certainly helped the big theater chains in the US show first run films. While at the same time, it is prohibitively expensive for second run movie houses to do the same (MKPE Consulting, 2012). The subsidy to the theaters is for the first time conversion only. Any maintenance, repairs, and future replacement costs of the new technology is the responsibility of the exhibitors.

Another important reason for the DCI format to spread in the US quickly is the success of 3-D movies in the last five years. *Avatar* set the standard for high quality digital cinematography and it was available only in the digital 3-D format. The film grossed more than $760 million in the US and international markets (Box Office Mojo, 2012). The big exhibitors saw the golden rainbow in converting their theaters with such box office successes. As of this date, 50% of the US theaters have converted to digital projection. The market development in India, however, differs from this story. When you read the media coverage in India about digital theaters and various media releases by involved companies, it is easy to come away with the impression that it is a 'revolution' in cinema exhibition in India. The reality in the marketplace is far more complex than such media hype.

Digital exhibition technology essentially consists of a compressed data file (6-8 GB) that is downloaded via satellite into servers installed at the cinema hall, which in turn is displayed by a high quality projector onto a large screen in an auditorium. DG2L Technologies, a New York-based corporation, reportedly offers technology and training and is praised by

Krishna Picture Palace, a single screen theater, in my hometown. Photo: M. Pendakur.

Vishwanath with digital projection equipment. Photo: M. Pendakur.

Film projectors at Krishna Picture Palace. Photo: M. Pendakur.

Projectionist at Krishna Picture Palace. Photo:

their Indian partner, UFO Moviez as

> "an end-to-end solution comprising film capture, encoding, encryption, management, and playback"
> (DG2L: Showest, 2006, p. 1).

In the United States, there is no satellite delivery of digital prints. Distributors ship a hard drive containing the movie file to each cinema in the country. In contrast, in India the digital file is sent via the Internet to the theater because the file is much smaller than the DCI file that a Hollywood movie requires.

Venture capitalists from different parts of the world flocked to this new opportunity to convert single screen cinemas. Apollo Tyres, which manufactures automobile tires, raised Rs. 1500 million ($60 million) to float UFO Moviez. The UK-based equity investor, 3i, invested more than Rs. 1000 million ($22 million) in this new company. The US-based DG2L also bought a 15% stake in UFO Moviez. The Apollo Group holds 60% stake in the company while certain individuals who are the original promoters of the new technology from the US hold 25% equity in the company. In other words, this is a US-India-UK partnership to bring this new technology to India and change the way films are distributed and experienced all over the country.

Digital cinemas offer some obvious advantages to distributors and exhibitors. Simultaneous release of 1000 prints can be enormously expensive in terms of printing, shipping, and managing transportation whereas a digital file can be quickly sent via satellite technology and downloaded hundreds of miles from a transmission point.[12] [open endnotes in new window] All that a theater needs are technological training, reliable electric supply, a server, projector, and other technologies needed to make it all work.

*Krrish (*Rakesh Roshan*, Hindi, 2006), India's version of *Superman*, had one of the biggest openings for an Indian film. It was released across the world with a record number of 790 prints, 250 of them in the overseas market. Krrish also went out digitally to 87 UFO screens in the first week and another 90 screens in week two. Aditya Shastri, CEO of UFO International, was quoted in his company press release:

> "It is (sic) has been our privilege to be part of this success and bringing the latest in digital projection technology has surely been an advantage. We are proud of our association with *Krrish* and remain committed to ensuring pristine quality images with perpetual life with no compromise in quality. With *Krrish*'s trouble free shows under our belt, we can definitely stake our claim to a stable and rugged technology of digital viewing. The overall response towards digital cinema has been extremely positive and will be a constant source of motivation for us." (http://www.dcinematoday.com/dc/pr.aspx?newsId=565, p. 1).

Adlabs, a Mumbai-based company that has diversified operations in production, distribution and exhibition as well as film processing, is engaged in digital conversion of theatres. Nishit R. Shetty, head of operations, Adlabs Digital, said, "Today digital distribution is relevant only in places that don't get the prints in the first week of release. Once the quality of projection comes close to or even better than 35 mm projection

Vishnu Theater. Photo: M. Pendakur.

Aishwarya Rai, one of the top stars of Bollywood, does an item number in *Dhoom2* (Sanjay Ghadvi, 2006).
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2j5XaFEviFc

system in India, then the concept of digital distribution assumes significance at bigger theatres" (Mazumdar, 2007, p.1).

Shastri and Shetty are good advocates of this new technology and what appears clear is that 'B' and 'C' centers see some advantages in this mode of distribution. If they can show a new film at the same time as an 'A' center, the whole system of classification that disadvantages the 'B' and 'C' centers will collapse. A new film, even if it is a dud at the box office, has some life in the opening week before the word of mouth spreads about how bad the film is. On the other hand, if the film is a success with the audience, the small cities and towns can enjoy simultaneous releases of new films. Some enthusiasts who travel several miles to go see a new film in a bigger city will be enticed to come to a single screen in their own town if the projection and sound quality are on par with the big city theatres. Wider release of a successful film brings in the box office quicker and a distributor does not have to wait a whole year or six months to see their film go through all the markets if more theatres can be reached at minimal cost (or at least less than what the distributor has to pay to strike that many prints and pay for shipping, replacement of worn out prints, etc.) Digital conversion of theatres offers these advantages to both distributors and exhibitors.

While economic logic appears to be on the side of this change, there were significant concerns on the part of theatre owners that had to be solved. To understand the complexity of this technological change, let us turn my home town in Karnataka, about 150 miles from Bengaluru. It is a small town with about 20,000 inhabitants, but the area surrounding has small villages that are populated by some 60,000 people. They come into town for a market day or to go to a government office. There are three single-screen movie houses that operate as small businesses with no equity investment or partnerships from outside firms. The owner of *Krishna Picture Palace* is Vishwanath Gangavathi. It is the oldest theatre in town with 600 seats and, relies primarily on Kannada language films because the market, unlike Mysore or Bengaluru, does not have that much linguistic diversity. An occasional Telugu film or a Hindi film may play a week or at a morning show, but the audience is primarily Kannada speakers who wish to see their own stars and stories. Kannada film industry turns out about 80-100 films a year that keep the 1000 single screen theatres in the state well-supplied.

Vishwanath decided to invest in digital cinema technology in 2006 because he pointed out,

> "print costs and other distribution costs have been rising; quality of prints has always been a problem for exhibitors."

Before investing, he compared the digital cinema systems offered by competing companies:

> "We looked at different systems that are available and made the deal with a Bombay company called Universal Film Organization (UFO). We pay a total of Rs. 225,000 ($4500) to get their patented computer system and a digital projector; they will charge Rs. 150 ($3) per download of a film via the Internet on to the server. Installation and training of projectionists are included in the price. The other costs are a sound system and new chairs, etc. to convert this into a better theatre. I am going to use surround sound and remove all the benches to make only two classes—balcony and lower stall and raise the price for

both" (Gangavathi, 2006).

When I asked if he would continue to maintain the analog projectors that unspool the 35 mm prints, Vishwanath noted,

> "Digital theatre does not mean we will abandon the 35 mm projectors yet. Until the system works out and more titles become available, film will continue."

Almost seven months after the telephone interview, I visited Vishwanath at his theatre in January 2007. He had experienced the digital 'revolution' and was not terribly impressed. He had bought the technology, which had been installed successfully, and his projectionists had been trained by UFO Moviez. He had also upgraded the sound system as he had planned with new seats and the ticket prices had gone up from Rs. 10 (20 cents) to Rs. 15 (30 cents) in order to pay for all these expenses. To accommodate the needs of this new but delicate computer technology, he had to air condition the room where the server and the projector were placed, along with a back-up generator because the electricity supply is unreliable.

Vishwanath was frustrated and wondered aloud why he had ventured into this new technology when he was sitting on guaranteed profits. The expected availability of film titles had not worked out because only 3-5 Kannada films were available for digital transmission. It meant some of the films that would have been attractive to his market were not in circulation in the digital format right away. That meant the primary advantage of securing a new film when it released in Bengaluru was not realized. It essentially relegated his theatre to a 'C' center.

Secondly, the distributors charged Rs. 250-300 ($5-6) per show for playing the movie and their computers were capable of keeping track of the exact number of times the movie file was used to play in any theatre. This was an added cost to his operation. While the distributor charged this fee uniformly to all screens whether they are in an 'A' center or 'C' center for using a digital file, the grossing potential is markedly different. For example, Vishwanath's 600-seat capacity theater with Rs. 15 (30 cents) a seat can only gross Rs. 9000 ($180) per show. On top of this, distributors in Karnataka passed on the cost of converting a 35 mm print to a digital file, approximately Rs. 18000 ($360) per film. These new costs are a source of worry for the small, single-screen exhibitors while the revenues and profits of multiplexes are growing.

The most worrisome problem to Vishwanath was downloading from the satellite was rather slow, often taking three hours, and not reliable. The server developed problems too often. On the day I arrived he was faced with such a problem and, luckily, he had a 35 mm print of the same film ready to be shown. In effect, the distributors are shipping a print in addition to the digital file download, just in case. I visited *Vishnu*, the single-screen theatre next door, operated by Vishwanath's brother, Lakshmipathi. He had also looked into buying digital projection technology, but decided against it. Instead, he invested in a digital Dolby sound system. That was comparatively less capital invested and his audience was pleased with better quality sound.

The promise held by digital cinema technology in small towns came slowly. By 2012, UFO Moviez and their competitors adjusted their business models to encourage single screen owners in small towns to convert to digital display. I interviewed Vishwanath by telephone (Gangavathi, March 2,

2012) and he was delighted to report all the positive changes that have occurred in a five-year span. The technology has improved dramatically in terms of download speeds and the UFO Moviez maintains the projectors and replaces parts at no cost to the exhibitor. They are also not charging the exhibitors to convert by providing the projectors for free. As a consequence, Vishwanath's brother who owns the Vishnu Theater next door also converted to digital display two years ago.

In the new business model implemented by digital technology companies, they collect Rs. 10,000 ($200) for converting each print from the distributors. As the distributors save all print costs, they are willing to pay this fee. This is different from what the Hollywood Majors did in the US market but from the exhibitors perspective it was beneficial.

Furthermore, all of the films in Kannada, Telugu, Tamil, and Hindi languages are available in digital format. This was one of the biggest obstacles for success of this technology. Once that occurred, the old designation of A, B, C status given to single screen theaters disappeared. Small town audiences can have access to a new movie on the same day that is released in Bengaluru. The small town exhibitor has to still negotiate with the distributors to secure films on certain terms. Vishwanath told me that distributors are demanding bigger advances ($800 to $1000) per film and if the picture fails at the box office the exhibitor has to wait a long time to get the money back.

The rapid growth of multiplex theaters with digital projection and high quality sound and their success with urban audiences in the big cities created a new dynamic in the film industry and an unprecedented conflict for supremacy over the box office. This tug of war also affected the Hollywood Majors who were enjoying growth of audiences and revenues for their pictures in India's multiplexes. We will turn to that interesting power struggle now and see how the contending parties argued their case and what role the Central Government played in sorting out this conflict.

Producer-distributors strike back

It is reported that by 2009 multiplexes took in on the average of about 60% of the total box office in the nation and the rest went to the single-screen cinemas. Some 643 producers of Hindi films in Bombay were members of various trade associations. While not all of them were actively producing films, some of these family-owned operations had created vertically integrated, production-distribution companies. Some had even expanded their distribution operations into lucrative markets such as the U.K. and the United States.

One such vertically integrated producer-distributor is Yash Raj Films, based in Mumbai, that produced many successful films, including the super hit, *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge (*Aditya Chopra, Hindi, 1995). It was a romantic comedy set in the UK and had such a huge response with domestic and global Indian audiences that it paved the way for others to make films with worldwide Indian audiences in mind. Yash Raj Films decided to test their company's muscle with the multiplex owners by trying to alter the revenue sharing agreements in 2006. Their major film, *Fanaa* (Kunal Kohli, Hindi, 2006), with Superstars, Aamir Khan and Kajol, and dealt with the contemporary issue of terrorism in India, was set to be released in May 2006. Yashraj Films demanded that the multiplexes give up 60% of the box office collections in the first week, 50% in the second,
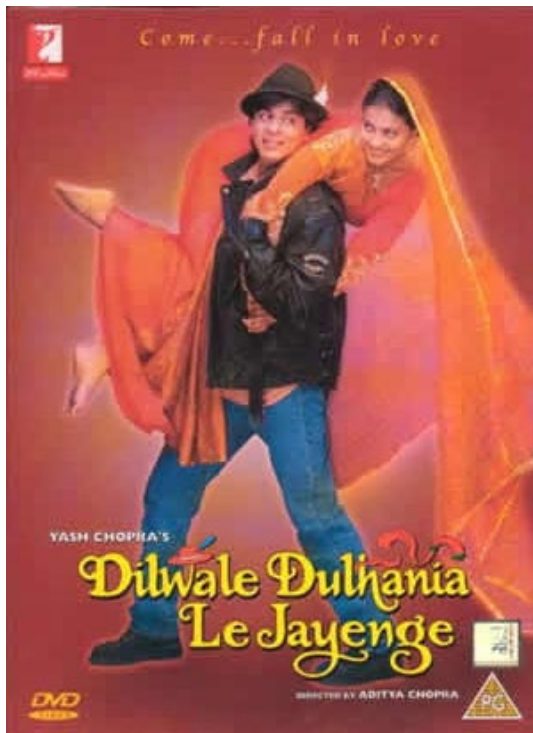
This superhit spurred the making of other films for a worldwide Indian audience.

This film, with major stars and a theme about contemporary terrorism in India, was the focus of a major dispute about splitting profits between multiplexes and producers.

40% in the third, and 35% in the subsequent weeks. As production costs are seldom in control, and that the multiplexes reap 100% of the profits from the food and beverage sales, the producer-distributors historically struggle to get more out of the theaters. Whether they succeed or not in that regard is usually a testament to their power and which side of the issue the state may weigh in. In this instance, the multiplex owners refused to budge and blocked the release of *Fanaa* in their theaters.

The reaction from the production-distribution sector was quick and forceful. Amit Khanna, President of the Film and Television Producers Guild, issued a stern statement to Deepak Asher, the President of the Multiplex Association. "We would like to strongly condemn the action of your members to boycott the release of our member Yashraj Films *Fanaa*." Asher noted that this uncalled for action was against the spirit of free enterprise and amounted to cartelization. He further stated,

> "...In case your members decide to go ahead with the blockade we too will have to advise our members to take whatever steps necessary to safeguard their interests" (*One India News*, 2006).

There were a few other big budget productions in 2006--*Krrish*, *Kabhi Alvida na Kehna* and *Dhoom 2*-that were about to be released by Yash Raj Films. If the multiplexes boycotted these films, which went on to become box office hits, the losses to the multiplex owners would be considerable. The producer-distributors could have released those films on single-screen theaters and still made most of their profits. Nothing of that sort happened in 2006. The Multiplex Association could not keep its membership together as individual companies in Mumbai and other cities began making deals with Yashraj Films within that week. However, the fundamental issue of what is the fair share of the gross box office from the multiplexes festered for a couple of years and resulted in an impressive show of strength by the producer-distributor combines.

Some of the leading production-distribution companies in Mumbai came together in early 2009 to form a new association by the name of United Producers and Distributors Forum (UPDF) to deal specifically with the rising power of the multiplexes. This group of producer-distributor companies is the "who's who" of Bombay cinema:

- Ronnie Screwalla, CEO of UTV Software Communications
- Sunil Lulla, Jyoti Deshpande, and Nandu Ahuja of the Eros Group
- Sandeep Bhargava, CEO of Studio 18 and Indian Films Company
- Yash Chopra of Yash Raj Films, Private Ltd.
- Mukesh Bhatt of Vishesh Films Private Ltd.
- Ratan Jain of Venus Films Private Ltd., also president of the Association of Motion Pictures and T.V. Programme Producers (AMPTPP)
- Vidhu Vinod Chopra of M/s Vinod Chopra Films Private Ltd.
- Ramesh Taurani of Tips Industries
- G. P. Sippy, President of Indian Motion Pictures Distribution

Association and himself a major producer
- Manmohan Shetty, President of The Film and Television Producers Guild of India Ltd. (FTPGI)
- Karan Johar, director and producer, Dharma Productions
- Vasu Bhagnani of Puja Entertainment
- Ashutosh Gowarikar , a major director and owner of AG Private Ltd.
- Ramesh Sippy, Producer and Distributor of RS Entertainment
- Shahrukh Khan, major Hindi film star and owner of M/s Red Chillies Entertainment Private Ltd.
- Aamir Khan, another major star, owner of M/s Aamir Khan Production Private Ltd.

These eminent personalities of the film industry, representing the interests of producers and distributors of Hindi films, decided to use their collective strength against the multiplex chains by launching a set of actions to force the chains to their knees. These producers not only withheld supply of films but also threatened to punish anyone in the industry who cooperated with the multiplex operators. The producers combine held well-publicized meetings where they discussed various tactics. They also declared to the media that no product would be released starting April 4, 2009 until they could extract more favorable revenue-sharing terms. In addition, the two industry associations—AMPTPP and FTPGI—issued letters to all their members about this organized boycott of multiplexes that carried a threat of suspension of those who violated this call. With such big producer-distributors and two of the three major stars of Hindi cinema, who themselves were producers attached to this group, the boycott was conducted openly with a press conference in Bombay. UPDF's bold action to withhold product clearly had its intended effect on the marketplace. Except for a few low budget Hindi films, no major film was released during the boycott. The Multiplex Association of India, representing their members, buckled under this high pressure and agreed to new revenue sharing terms on June 9, 2009.

Although the multiplex owners agreed to new terms to obtain product, which is their lifeblood that brings in an audience, which in turn, buys pop corn and other foods, they resorted to legal action against the producers combine. The Multiplex Association of India filed a complaint against the UPDF and the other two trade associations on May 26, 2009 before the Central Government agency, The Competition Commission of India.[13] The Commission found the producer-distributor corporations guilty of the charges leveled against them and declared:

> "The boycott of multiplexes by the OP (producer-distributors) was as blatant an act of limiting or controlling production, distribution, etc. of films as can be. Similarly, their joint stand on fixing the revenue ratio was unarguably an example of joint price fixing" (MRTPC, Order, 2011, p. 72).

While both sides had organized bodies to represent their interests, the Commission agreed with the complainant that the producer-distributors, who created 90 percent of the major Hindi films from Bombay acted like a cartel. Their collective threats against other producers and the boycott against the multiplexes worked to benefit the producer-distributor corporations in the cartel. The Commission disagreed with the respondents in the case that the multiplex owners had acted as a cartel by stating, "...it is an established principle of law that one wrong does not justify another" (MRTPC Order, 2011, p. 73) and indirectly stated that there was no existence of 'cartel-like conduct' by the complainant whereas there clearly

existed such action on the part of the producer-distributor combine.

The Commission also found that the new revenue sharing agreement—fixed at 50%, 42.5%, 37.5%, and 30% for the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 4th week respectively, enhanced the producer's share of the net box office by 2% from the first week and is also higher for the subsequent weeks (MRTPC, Order, p. 18). The Commission noted that across the country, the multiplexes had raised ticket prices in response to the new revenue sharing agreement by 15-20%, a burden that was passed on the consumers. The Commission, in addition found that the higher revenue sharing agreement is a barrier to entry into the multiplex market. The Commission emphasized the importance of the Competition Act of 2002 by exclaiming:

> " ...keeping in view of the economic development of the country, for the establishment of a Commission to prevent practices having adverse effect on the competition, to promote and sustain competition in market, to protect the interests of consumers and to ensure freedom of trade carried on by other participants in markets in India. And, therefore, it is incumbent upon the Commission to protect the interests of the consumers under the provisions of the Act" (MRTPC Order, 2011, p. 84).

While sounding noble about the interests of consumers, the state was forced to step in to investigate the market distortion caused by the producer-distributor combine. There is no evidence to suggest that ticket prices have fallen due to this intervention by the Indian government. The terms and conditions regarding revenue sharing were left unchanged in this Order. The Order demanded that the producers file an undertaking to the effect that they would not indulge in cartel-like behavior in the future. The Order also included a penalty of Rs. 100,000 ($2000) to each of the named respondents, a measly sum of money given that their dealings are in millions of dollars. In the final analysis, this intervention of the state was no more than a show that the state was monitoring the competitive situation in the economy and that it would philosophically try to protect the neoliberal idea that competition is a public good.

Another significant development is the expansion of international markets for Indian cinema to which we will now turn.

Colorful costumes in a dance number evoke folk traditions.

Stars have what ad agencies consider "aspirational value" for marketing high-end fashion and accessories.

Bollywood mania spreads

"Why do I love Bollywood movies? To an Indian, that's like asking why we love our mothers; we don't have a choice. We were born of them...My aunt's family emigrated to Uganda from India a century ago; she now lives in England and has never been to India...none of the children under 5 in her extended family spoke English...The children, two or three generations removed from India, were living in this simulated Indiaworld (of Bollywood)."—Suketu Mehta, novelist.

Mehta's statement captures the ongoing love affair between the South Asian diaspora and Bollywood, and as we will see, the enthusiasm for this cinema has spread widely. In a matter of 15 years, the general awareness and perception of critics of Indian cinema all over the world has dramatically changed. Instead of being relegated to the margins of Hollywood and European art cinema in leading capitals of the world, Bollywood has in so many ways earned respect and widespread attention. Major news outlets in the U.S. and Canada cover Bollywood movies' openings and other events, stars and events, and the industry matters on a regular basis. What is interesting is that it is not simply excitement about the large market in India or worldwide for Bollywood cinema but also the masala form itself. Leading universities in North America and Europe are offering courses in Indian cinema, holding conferences and seminars. Dozens of books have been published. Major Hollywood directors began to take note of Bollywood's impressive inroads into the international markets, and especially into the US-Canada markets. For instance, Baz Luhrman borrowed stylistic elements from Bollywood for his 2001 film, *Moulin Rouge,* and even included the hit song *Chamma Chamma*, the music for which was composed by Anu Malik. Luhrman told a Times of India reporter in Delhi:

"I first came to India 15 years ago with my wife. We wanted to do a stage production of Benjamin Britten's version of 'A Midsummer Night's Dream.' This is the visit when I was also influenced by Bollywood and felt the need to integrate elements from it in my work" (Sharma, 2011).

The star composer and major trend setter for Indian cinema (not just in Hindi language films but also in several south Indian languages) is A. R. Rahman. He won two Oscars for Best Original Music Score and Best Original Song in the British film, *Slum Dog Millionaire* (Danny Boyle, 2008). The musical extravaganzas performed live with Bollywood stars, singers, composers and dancers appeal to sell out crowds in cities worldwide. For Canada Day celebrations in Toronto

Aishwarya Rai at Cannes.
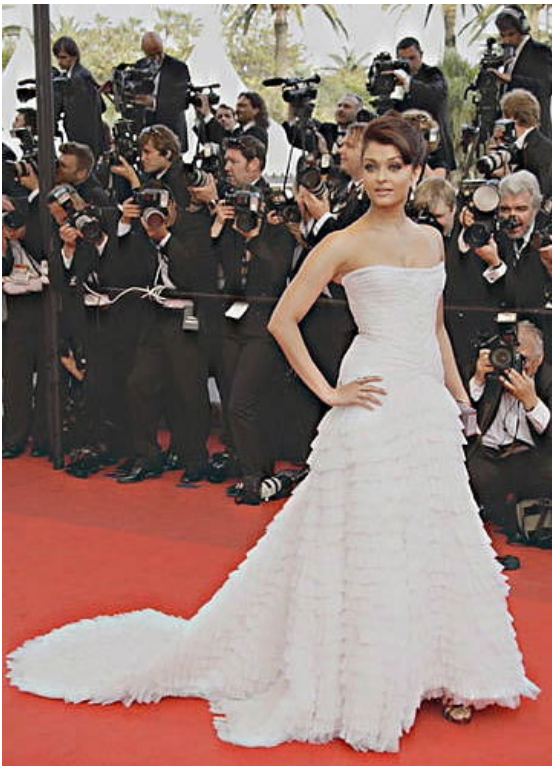
Katrina Kaif promotes Nakshatra brand of diamonds.

last year, at a large gathering of multicultural audiences young Indian-Canadians performed dance numbers to Bollywood tunes and taught the 'moves' to the audience.

Stars have what marketing executives call, "aspirational value." In other words, their fans aspire to buy those commodities—clothing, watches, makeup, handbags, expensive jewelry including diamonds, and foreign travel—endorsed by their favorite screen idols. Indian movie stars have been hired to represent international product brand names at home and abroad. Aishwarya Rai, the leading lady of many Bollywood movies, started endorsing L'Oreal products worldwide in 2000. Others have followed suit. Some of the major stars have been employed as 'brand ambassadors' for various Indian states. Amitabh Bachchan, who has played the lead role in hundreds of Bollywood movies, provided the most controversial endorsement to the state of Gujarat (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S6TAdOQh5K4).[14] [open endnotes in new window]

These days, it is common to see major stars from Bollywood sitting on the juries of prestigious international film festivals at Cannes, Toronto, and Berlin. Shabana Azmi, Amitabh Bachchan, Anil Kapoor, Nandita Das and others have played roles in Hollywood films. The most recent was *Mission Impossible: Ghost Protocol* (Brad Bird, 2011) in which Anil Kapoor played a lecherous Indian capitalist who controls a satellite crucial to the plot. Bollywood films have world premiers in key markets—London, New York, Sydney, Toronto—with all the glamour and glitter that is attached to such promotional activities for big budget films. Tom Cruise, major star and producer of Hollywood blockbusters, attended the premier of *Mission Impossible: Ghost Protocol* in Mumbai. The latest to join in this excitement for Bollywood culture is FinnAir with a commercial that celebrated India's Republic Day on January 26, 2012. It is a song and dance number inside a plane by the whole crew to the delightful surprise of passengers heading to Delhi. (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mEsnb3kUDAw). Madame Tussaud's wax museum in London has at least five Bollywood stars to show off.

All this excitement and international recognition is pretty heady stuff, but Indian popular cinema has had a long presence in countries where Indians migrated during the colonial period either as indentured workers or for trading, education and other purposes. After the abolition of slavery in the late 1800s, millions of poor Indians were taken to the far reaches of the British Empire as indentured servants and most did not return home. More recent migrations of workers from India to the Gulf countries began in the 1980s. Nearly a million Indian migrant workers, consisting of skilled and unskilled people, now serve

Shahrukh Khan dances with fans at a Toronto mall, 2010.
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4y5PEMJfiM8

This historical epic made much more money abroad than it did in India.

in construction, engineering, education, nursing, and domestic labor (http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Indian-migrant-workers -exploited-and-enslaved-in-Arab-countries-23121.html).
They are the "reserve army of labor" who are forced to return home after a few years because they can get only temporary work visas.

The pattern of immigration to the United States and Canada has been different in the sense that it is miniscule compared to the situation in the Middle East and most who come to North America do not return. Until the 1960s, immigration for Indians and Chinese workers was nearly impossible because immigration laws explicitly forbid Asians. However, during John Kennedy's brief administration in the United States and Pierre Trudeau's long tenure as Prime Minister of Canada, more professionals were given visas to enter and settle down as permanent residents. Family reunification policies in Canada also helped Asian immigrants that were related to those who had come during the British colonial period. Once they attained permanent residency, they were also allowed to "import" brides or grooms for their offspring from the home countries.

All in all, the Indian diaspora stands at an estimated 27 million people scattered across 190 countries around the world. They support their families back home by remitting funds to India that amounted to $21 billion in 2003 and rose to $55 billion in 2010 (Mukherji and D'Mello, 2011).[15] They are also avid moviegoers. In my own case, I have seen Bollywood films playing in Nairobi, Dar Es Salaam, Burkina, Tehran, Cairo, London, New York, Miami, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Vancouver, and Toronto. Even those who don't understand Hindi go to see Bollywood films because they entertain the whole family. In West Africa where they speak French, I saw audiences enjoying Bollywood imports at single screen cinemas and to my surprise the prints were not even dubbed into French.

Until the early 1980s, only the 'art' cinema made it to the film festivals and college campuses in the U.S.-Canada markets. Indian films that were made for the Indian masses had been extremely popular in the former Soviet Union and parts of Africa and Latin America. They were primarily Hindi language exports. Tamil cinema traveled a bit more compared to other language cinemas because the Tamil diaspora in East Asia was keen on watching films from the home country.

In recent years, some Hindi films have grossed higher revenues abroad compared to their performance in the domestic market. *Jodhaa Akbar* (Ashutosh Gowarikar, 2008), an epic historical drama about the Mughals, is one such example of a big budget production with major stars, sets, and locations. Its success in India, measured by box office revenues is a mere $3.4 million, whereas the revenues from international markets for the film amounted to $ 23.4 million or 87.2% of the global revenues (Box Office Mojo, 2012). This shift began slowly first in the U.S.-Canada market when people bought VCRs and poor quality videos came into circulation. In cities with large Indian populations—New York, Chicago, Los Angeles—Indian entrepreneurs began to lease single screen theaters over the weekends and started screening 35 mm prints of popular films. I remember going to these

single screen cinema halls in Chicago with my teenage daughter in the winter months when the outside temperature would go down to 20 degrees F below zero and the theatre operator would not switch on the heating system. These entrepreneurs also owned a local video rental operation. For example, Video Sound, Atlantic Video, and several other stores on Chicago's Devon Avenue were quite successful at rental and sell-through of VHS tapes of Bollywood and other language films. Video Sound also screened Hindi language films at Adelphi, a Rogers Park area theater.

All of this began to change with the success of *Hum Aaap Ke Hai Koun?* (Soorj Bharjatya, 1994), and subsequently, *Dilwale Dulhaniya Lejayenge* (Aditya Chopra, 2005). In the *Gateway Cinema* with 1600-seat capacity, these two films were sold out for weeks. Both the films offer not only the visual pleasures of song, dance, and a narrative that surrounds family, but they are also about an India that the diaspora audiences crave for. *Hum Aap Ke Hai Kaun?* is a story about two Hindu families, idealistic in their representations, and their large extended family and friends. It is filled with numerous songs, dance numbers, and family get-togethers. It is about falling in love and also about women sacrificing their life for the welfare of the whole family. In this film, there are no villains or super human heroes of the earlier Bollywood films that fought against corrupt politicians, the police, and rich people. There is no poverty and people live in big mansions, conduct businesses internationally, wear expensive clothing, jewelry and drive imported cars. Class or caste conflict that was grist for the cinema of the earlier decades simply disappeared.

Dilwale Dulhaniya Lejayenge played with the concepts of nostalgia and alienation of Indians abroad in a culture dominated by Anglo-Saxons. Centered around a small, trader's family in London, and their extended families in India, the film connected the themes of the strong desire to maintain family ties and also maintain Indian traditional culture where patriarchy reins supreme. A star studded and song and dance filled narrative takes the audience on a tour of Europe and brings them "home" to a town in Punjab where familial bonds are stronger than what is presented as life in Britain. The protagonists in the film, played by Shahrukh Khan and Kajol, fall in love while they accidentally meet on a tour of Europe. When the heroine's father learns of the situation, he takes her to India to get her married to a man whom she never knew. The hero has to overcome the patriarch's strongly held belief in the arranged marriage system. The father of the bride also has to change his views about how British-born Indians are

Hum Aaap Ke Hai Koun? No villains, no poverty, just big extended families, wealth, lots of song and dance, young love, and women sacrificing for their families. It was a great
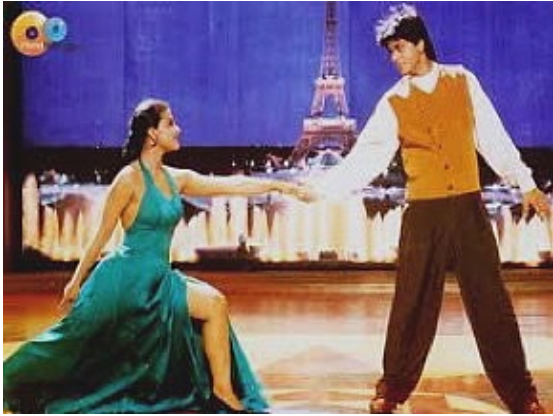
Dilwale Dulhaniya Lejayenge: falling in love abroad and overcoming patriarchy back home—another international hit.

in terms of their character and accept the protagonist's love for his daughter. Instead of eloping with his lover, the hero wins her parents' hearts by his honorable and loving behavior. The music in both films and the song and dance numbers were big successes with the audience all over the world, just as their mass appeal of love triumphing over various odds posed by custom, tradition, family, and patriarchy.

The biggest markets till the 1990s had been in the Middle East and, as such, producers in Mumbai did not take the foreign market expansion in the West seriously. The huge success of the two films mentioned above woke them up.

By 2007, there were nearly 100 cinemas located in some 20 states in the US that regularly screened Hindi films in the 35mm format (Fahim, 2007, p. 1). Some of the biggest multiplex chains in the US—AMC, General Cinema—also started to show Bollywood movies in one of their many screens in cities such as Chicago and Newark. UK, Australia, Canada became substantial markets in terms of revenue generation for these films. Industry insiders reported that markets for Hindi films were growing at approximately 12.6 per cent per year inside and outside the country (Joshi, 2006, p. 75). Australia, which used to be worth $50,000 in distribution revenue potential for a Hindi film grew ten times (Joshi, 2006, p. 75).

Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, and Kannada films command screenings also, although not to the extent of the Hindi films. It is not unusual to see a Hindi film open simultaneously in Mumbai and other Indian cities as well as London, Toronto, New York, Sydney, Chicago, Los Angeles, Houston, and other cities worldwide where South Asians live.

The films used to be marketed by a handful of Indian-owned, small private firms. Eros International and Video Sound were the leading distributors that brought Indian entertainment to the US shores. Seeing the success of films in the early 1990s, major Indian companies began direct distribution in the US-Canada and other markets. For instance, Yash Raj Films established an office in New York. Similarly, Sony Entertainment Television, which has a significant presence in India through SET, decided to enter film distribution and in turn began to finance Hindi films. SET established an office in New Jersey to oversee their Bollywood distribution operations in the U.S.-Canada markets.

The presence of South Asians in these two countries is of considerable importance not only because of the size of this community but also because of their high purchasing power. The U.S. Census Bureau created a new category called 'Asian Indian' to better report numbers based on national origin. By 2010, Asian Indians (people of ancestry from India only) totaled 2,843,000. If we added people with ancestry from Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, the numbers went up to 3,373,758.
(http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/tableservices/ jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=DEC_ 10_SF1_QTP8&prodType=table).

The South Asian households are not typical in the sense that a number of relatives may be living under the same roof in order to help each

other and also accumulate enough savings before branching out on their own. As such median household incomes are larger than the average U.S. household (http://www.asian-nation.org/indian.shtml).

Nevertheless, they love Bollywood movies and music. Asian Indians in the United States are concentrated in various cities of California, New York, New Jersey, Chicago, Seattle, and Miami as follows (Proximity, 2012):

- Chicago-Joliet-Naperville area 171,901
- Los Angeles 119,901
- San Francisco 119,854
- San Jose, 117,711
- New York-Northern New Jersey 526,133
- Seattle 52,6512
- Portland 15,117
- Miami 41,334
- Orlando 26,105
- Tampa 23,526

Bollywood commands an audience of not just Asian Indians but people from around the world, especially Indo-Caribbeans, people from various parts of Africa, East Asia, Middle East and Central America (Guyana, Suriname). In areas of the United States where a higher concentration of South Asians lived, Indian entrepreneurs had launched multiplexes to screen Bollywood movies. For instance, in North Bergen, New Jersey at Columbia Park Cinema 12, half of its screens were dedicated to Hindi films (Fahim, 2007, p. 1). It is now owned by Big Cinemas that shows Telugu, Tamil, Malayalam, Hindi, and Hollywood films. In Los Angeles, another major city with a sizeable South Asian population, Naz8 screens imported films from India regularly. Just as Devon Avenue in Chicago has restaurants, travel agencies, grocery stores, clothing shops, video stores, and bookstores to cater to South Asians, Naz8 is located in Astoria that has a whole street filled with such stores.

As consumption of entertainment becomes more diverse, not just feature films but also television shows, music CDs, live entertainment (especially in which the major stars perform), Internet and mobile platforms, and video-on-demand, South Asian entrepreneurs are setting up new businesses to extract revenues from the market. The latest of these is BODVOD, a company that is offering Indian movie entertainment as video on demand. In an interview the co-founder, Vinod Bhatt, described his company's operations:

> "In terms of what the company does, we hold exclusive rights to a basket of movies and music primarily coming from India—primarily Bollywood music and movies—and we package, distribute and market that on pretty much all digital platforms. Mostly video-on-demand, anything delivered using IP protocol-Google Video, iTunes, etc., as well as services run by mobile carriers and also mobile devices" (Aditham, 2007, p. 4).

Bhatt further noted the following about the size of the market:

> "To date, our distribution is actually in about 11 million households, on all of Time Warner and all of Cox. We're covering probably around 70% of the South Asian population in the US today...I think when you look at the South Asian market in the country today, it's probably the most affluent group out of any of the ethnic or even non-ethnic groups that exist. I think the median household income is $68,771 according to the latest census update. When you look at education levels, about 61% of them have a college degree. Then on top of that, they're overall Web and tech-savvy with 81% of them having broadband access in their homes" (Aditham, 2007, p. 4).

Even though Bhat's assertion that all South Asians are technologically

savvy is exaggerated, such high subscription rate among them for broadband services is impressive. Interestingly enough, if Indian imported content is available for a certain price on cable television and in the video-on-demand format, the huge library of films from the earlier decades, which older audiences consider as their 'golden age' of cinema, will have demand. It is also likely the fine films produced by directors such as Guru Dutt, Shantaram, Bimol Roy, etc., just to name a few, or certain films of the 1970s and the 1980s which came to be known as the 'New Cinema' will become available without the annoyance of commercial interruptions on television. Online sale of DVDs of cinema in various Indian languages and genres has grown with Amazon becoming an outlet for better quality DVDs unlike the pirated versions in the Indian-owned grocery stores. Netflix has a large collection of Indian films in the DVD format and their collection of streamable videos is likely to grow in the near future. These developments are clearly phenomenal improvements for Indian cinema's availability to South Asians in the U.S. markets when compared to the down-market, chilly theatres of cold Chicago in the mid 1980s.

Conclusions

Bollywood is thriving on the foundation of the high-octane economic growth of the last 15 years, higher disposable incomes in the hands of the bulging middle class in India that demands more entertainment and also growth of revenues from global markets. The spread of Bollywood culture abroad and the excitement it commands in the Western media and in the large, South Asian diaspora around the world have added more confidence to the investors in Bollywood cinema.

The malling and multiplexing of India, along with the introduction of digital distribution and exhibition, are remarkable shifts in the film industry. They reflect the changes in national policy intended to reshape India for the 21st century global economy as a capitalist power. The balance has been tipped to serve the priorities of enhancing the capitalist market and the fast growing middle class. The upscale mall and the luxurious multiplexes, while expensive for those Indians who cannot afford to buy a full meal every day, are nevertheless offering a wider variety of film entertainment to an elite audience. The multiplex audience, perhaps the most globalized of all, appear to enjoy the benefits offered by these developments and, as they walk past the world famous brands of merchandize at the glistening mall, they get to enjoy the best that Indian, and even Hollywood cinema, can offer.

I have shown in this paper that the state's intervention in the economy is not simply about the broad strokes of policy to liberalize the command and control economy of the previous 50 years, but it is also about sorting out conflicts that arise between contending capitalists. More often than not, as we have seen in the case of multiplex theater chains and their battle with producer-distributor combines, the state functions as a mediator to preserve the interests of competition. It is not a neutral arbiter of power. As we have seen in this case study, the net effect of the state's mediation buttressed big investors in the multiplex theatrical market. The large firms in production-distribution on the other hand lost out this time.

The state attempts to legitimize its intervention by arguing that it serves the public (consumers of films or ticket buyers at the multiplexes) and, if competition is preserved, the market mechanism ends up serving the broader public good. However, as we saw, ticket prices actually went up.

The digital theatre has written the swan song for the age-old distribution and exhibition system in the country where prints were shipped to thousands of theaters by bus or rail. A digital file arrives via satellite to these newly converted theaters that feature DTS, Dolby and surround sound. The older classification of theaters—A, B, C centers—has become irrelevant in this time of change because a new film can be released simultaneously in large cities and small towns. The distributors use computer technology to establish a higher degree of control over the single-screen exhibitor.

It is clear to me that not all people will benefit by these technologies or structural changes equally. In cities where affluent populations live and where transport and energy supply may be abundant, exhibitors and distributors benefit by introducing new distribution technologies. The large, urban middle class certainly has access to a wider selection of films from within and outside India. The multiplex market has also resulted in more opportunities for new filmmakers and established producers to make a greater variety of films. However, the audience will end up paying higher and higher prices at the box office to support these new ways of finding digitized pleasure.

Go to Notes page

To top   Print version   JC 54   *Jump Cut* home

Notes

1. Cinepolis owns 275 cinemas that consist of 2550 screens in their worldwide operations. Their Indian holdings in 2011 were a total of 20 screens in four cities (Bengaluru, Thane, Amritsar, and Patna). See, www.CinepolisIndia.com/corporate/ [return to page 1]

2. The antecedents to the modern malls are the Grand Bazaar in Istanbul, Cairo and Tehran. The one in Istanbul is almost 600 years old. That city also prides to have the Spice Bazaar, an indoor mall that smells heavenly with myriad spices. None of these old bazaars, however, have security guards at the gates and any one could walk into them.

3. The state-controlled Doordarshan and many private networks beam programs over-the-air and via cable and satellite delivery systems. It is an advertiser supported system. The film industry supplies talent and programs to these networks. In rural India, well to do farmers have satellite dishes on top of their houses. What audiences prefer is programming in local languages, not imported programs from the West as it is the case in many countries of the world.

4. I have written about the centrality of music and dance to Indian popular cinema, their roots and appeal with the mass audience (Pendakur, 2003, pp. 119-143).

5. In the last 12 months, two major opposition movements developed and had a great deal of success against Central Government's policies regarding foreign direct investment and the rampant corruption in the country. The Cabinet had made the fatal decision to allow 100% foreign direct investment in the retail sector that would have meant Walmart and other global retailers would have entered the multi-brand retail sector and possibly wiped out a huge number of family-owned shops. The government ended up rescinding that decision for the time. There have been numerous corruption scandals since 1991, which have been exposed in the media. The ones that stood out were the Commonwealth Games in Delhi and the spectrum allocation case that was a "fire sale" to India's big capitalists. Several ministers are languishing in jails. In the wireless frequency sale case, the Supreme Court ordered that all those who received such licenses a few years ago should return them to the government, an unprecedented and historic decision by the highest court in the land and a victory for those who opposed public properties being put on sale to private interests.

6. Six vertically-integrated corporations that own diverse operations in

production, distribution and exhibition and control nearly 85% of the U.S. box office revenues are known as the Hollywood Majors. They are Paramount, Fox, Universal, Warners, Disney, and Columbia Pictures. They produce and distribute nearly all the big budget productions, have worldwide distribution networks and in some areas of the United States control theaters by way of direct ownership. Their principal lobby organization is called the Motion Picture Association of America which does not allow any other corporations to become members. Its sister organization was called the Motion Picture Export Association of America and in the last few years has changed it to Motion Picture Association and has offices in nearly 50 countries to lobby the local governments for open access for their members' films, lower taxes, and to get the local authorities to invest money and effort to prevent piracy. See Wasko (2003).

7. Big Cinemas is a subsidiary of Reliance Corporation, a telecommunications giant in India. 250 of their screens are in India and the rest are in the United States. This corporation also invested nearly $500 million with Steven Spielberg's DreamWorks to produce Hollywood movies for the worldwide market. Their goal is to build a vertically integrated production-distribution-exhibition corporation to compete with the Hollywood Majors, something that was not achieved by the UK-based Rank Pictures Organization, the Cineplex-Odeon Corporation based in Canada, Seagram's, also a Canadian Corporation with deep pockets, and most recently the France-based Vivendi. []

8. See The "Indian Entertainment Industry Report" by FICCI-KPMG, which predicts that by 2013 the number of multiplex screens in the country is likely to cross 1,600 (Sethi, 2010).

9. PVR built the four-plex in an outdoor mall in Delhi first and then expanded their operations to other cities in collaboration with an Australian company called Village Roadshow Entertainment. They are not partners any more as PVR bought them out.

10. In general, action-adventure films do well at the box office in India. James Bond movies were always a big draw in the cities. Walt Disney's animated films also had a good market with mass audiences in the cities. Movies with special effects are incredibly popular. *Avatar* (2009) was hugely successful with Indian audiences. Hollywood's strategy of dubbing films into Indian languages is paying off because dubbed films are shown even in small cities and towns. I saw *Twister* (1996) dubbed into Kannada and it was bizarre for me to experience that in a rural theater. I was in disbelief because of the way white people spoke my mother tongue. While that was comical for me, my friends and family who went to see this film with me enjoyed the film with all the special effects. A howl went up when cows started flying in the air! With the growth of English language speakers, especially in the cities, Hollywood's overall box office performance in India has doubled in the last twenty years. While China limits the total number of Hollywood imports to only 20 per year, India opened up the market thereby inviting more films, higher investment and also higher profits for the Hollywood Majors and others from the United States.

11. One my nieces, who completed an engineering degree last year, just graduated from this program at InfoSys. In 12 months, she was not allowed to go outside the campus until the training program was over. As such, she had not seen a movie at a theater in Mysore.

12. Print and advertising costs in Hollywood often exceed the cost of production of a film. Print costs in India may run up top 25% of a film's production cost. Each print may cost Rs. 80,000 ($1600) to Rs. 100,000 ($2,000) in India and $2000 in the United States. [return to page 3]

13. The Competition Act of 2002, a federal law, established the Competition Commission of India in October 2003. The Commission has six members and a chairperson, all appointed by the Central Government in Delhi. This body is entrusted with the responsibility of implementing the Act to ensure that capitalist markets work in a competitive manner. The Act "prohibits anti-competitive agreements, abuse of dominant position by enterprises and regulates competition combinations (acquisition, acquiring control and Mergers and Acquisitions) which causes or likely to cause an appreciable adverse effect on competition within India." This law is similar to the antitrust laws that were created in the United States and Canada starting in 1890. See http://www.cci.gov.in/index.php?option=com _content&task=view&exp=0&id=12

14. That state has a notorious reputation under its current Chief Minister Narendra Modi, who has been implicated in conspiring with Hindus in terrorizing and butchering thousands of Muslims in 2002. As a result of a campaign by concerned people in the Indian diaspora, the U.S. government has declined to grant a visitor visa to Modi. There are pending court cases against Modi and culprits at the Supreme Court level in India to bring them to justice. [return to page 4]

15. India receives the highest remittance from Indians abroad, followed by China ($51 billion) and Mexico ($22.6 billion), Philippines ($21.3 billion) and France ($15.9 billion).

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The "wife's" space of privilege and the "widow's" space of deprivation: Binodini watches Ashalata being adorned...
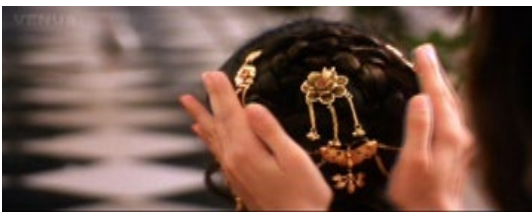
... for her husband in *Chokher Bali*.

Binodini withholds water from Asha.

Chokher Bali: a historico-cultural translation of Tagore

by Srimati Mukherjee

Editor's Note:

Srimati Mukherjee's article, "*Chokher Bali*: a historico-cultural translation of Tagore," was published in *Jump Cut* in 2012. In January 2015 the editors discovered that a large section of the article, about 455 words, had been directly copied and presented as original work in another publication. We have concluded that this is self-evident plagiarism.

The plagiarized passage appears in "Adaptation and Ideology: A Study of Rituparno Ghosh's Films," by Sananda Roy and was published in *The Indian Journal of Comparative Literature and Translation Studies,* Vol. 2, no. 1, February 2014, pp. 18-[https://ijclts.files.wordpress.com/2014/09/adaptation-and-ideology-a-study-of-rituparno-ghosh_s-films2.pdf].

From the bottom of Page 22, all through Page 23, and into Page 24, Sananda Roy copies from the original JUMP CUT publication with virtually no modification. Although Roy cites the original under "Webliography," there is no acknowledgement in the text itself or marker that it is a long direct quote from the section of the JUMP CUT original titled "Rupturing 'Tradition' to Reactivate the Subject," specifically from paragraphs 4 through 8. In addition, Roy does not include the URL to the original article, although she does include URLs for all her other references, thus making it less likely for a reader to notice the fraud. Therefore we conclude the plagiarism was deliberate, not simply an error or missing footnote, etc.

Subsequently we contacted the Indian journal and pointed out the plagiarism. They in turn contacted the Roy who responded with a statement we regard as essentially unsatisfactory as an explanation. At this point (early February 2015) we note the plagiarism here. *The Indian Journal of Comparative Literature and Translation Studies* will deal with the fraud according to their policies.

In his renowned 1936 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," Walter Benjamin observes that the "aura"

A smile on Binodini's face.

Binodini attempts to draw the pampered wife into the zone of unredeemed denial.

Charu in the swing sequence of *Charulata*...

... rising higher and higher from the ground ...

of a work of art diminishes with its "technological reproducibility" as reproduction "detaches" the object from the "sphere of tradition."[1] [open endnotes in new window] Yet, replication also "actualizes" the reproduced object as its receiver interacts with it in her/his individualized context. According to Benjamin, film is the most "powerful agent" for these "two processes" which lead to a "shattering of tradition." He commends this "destructive, cathartic side" of film which enables "the liquidation of the value of tradition in the cultural heritage" (Benjamin 2008, 22)[2] Benjamin, of course, speaks of the reduction in the "aura" of the original artwork as "reproduction" that "substitutes a mass existence" for the "unique existence" of the original (2008, 22). Further, he focuses on the reproduction being able to *travel* in *space*, thus eliciting myriad responses in different individualized contexts.[3]

In transferring to screen Rabindranath Tagore's novel *Chokher Bali*, Rituparno Ghosh brings us the story of a newly-married couple, Mahendra and Ashalata, who are passionately in love until this love is temporarily tarnished by the arrival into their extended family of a young, intelligent, and educated widow, Binodini. While, in line with Benjamin's thought, it is certainly true that many copies of Ghosh's *Chokher Bali: A Passion Play* (2003, Indian title in English *Sand in the Eye*) are available and, in some cases, these travel globally and evoke a range of reactions, I would like to focus, more specifically, on Benjamin's notions of the "shattering of tradition"; the "destructive cathartic side" of film; and his concept of "actualization" or reactivation. What is more important to my discussion is the passage of *time*, between the publication of Tagore's text, *Chokher Bali*, and the predicament of widows in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Bengal on the one hand and the making of Ghosh's film in the early-twenty first century on the other, rather than the ability of the reproduction (s) to travel through *space*.

Rupturing "tradition" and reactivating the subject

Even in a novel published in 1901-1902,[4] Tagore depicts Binodini not as a widow accepting of her fate but as an intermittently angry, resentful one who interrogates all the injustices that mar her life. However, Ghosh clearly adds more to his cinematic representation of Binodini's character. Some features of this representation that stand out prominently, particularly for a Bengali audience familiar with Tagore's *Chokher Bali*, are her receptivity to physical passion; her willingness to help other widows partake of pleasures that are taboo (such as drinking tea); and her unhesitating use of her widowhood to further her own ends.[5]

In reactivating Binodini's character not only in ways divergent from Tagore's novel, but with elements of agency that, hopefully, are more acceptable to an early-twenty first century global audience familiar with struggles for women's rights, Ghosh participates in the "liquidation of the value of tradition in the cultural heritage." As artist and film director, he challenges the moribund aspects of Bengali (or Indian) cultural tradition, drawing us into the "fixed" space of the widow as defined by this tradition and showing how mobilization in and out of this space is possible.[6] Ghosh's *Chokher Bali* brings us the "reproduction" of Binodini in our early-twenty first century context and makes us ponder how entrenched the "aura" of tradition is and what role film plays in disrupting this "aura."

... and entering an imaginative "reality" in which she bonds with Amal.

Charu comes back to the realm of the real.

Ghosh's representation of "dialogue" between the wife and the widow: Binodini swings while Asha pushes the swing...

... in the swing sequence of *Chokher Bali*.

Ascent and the implicit connection between Binodini and Charulata.

A brief discussion of Tagore's novel is relevant here. Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) is the national poet of India. A prolific writer, he is the author of songs, poems, short stories, novels, essays, plays, and dance dramas. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913 for his collection of poems *Gitanjali*. Tagore also founded the Santiniketan School in 1901 (now a part of Viswa Bharati University), an innovative school near Bolpur, West Bengal where students were taught in the midst of nature and encouraged to be self-dependent. A committed social reformer, Tagore was actively involved in rural reconstruction and spoke out against the caste system, untouchability, and the oppression of women among other issues.

His novel *Chokher Bali* addresses the numerous restrictions in the life of a Bengali Hindu widow, Binodini, and is distinctly Modernist in its exploration of psychological motivations of characters. In the novel, Binodini, who comes to live temporarily in Mahendra and Asha's family as discussed above, attempts at first to satisfy vicariously her (repressed) desire for love by composing love letters for her friend, the little-educated Asha to send to her husband, Mahendra. Shortly after this, during Asha's absence from home, Binodini is portrayed as not averse to receiving romantic attention from Mahendra and she creates possibilities for romantic moments as well. However, in the second half of the novel, Tagore depicts her as rejecting Mahendra's advances, contemptuous of him, and steadfastly in love with his friend Bihari. Following the family's discovery of Mahendra's growing attraction for her, she has to leave his household but because of a combination of difficult circumstances, she is obliged to take shelter and travel with him. However, she remains committed to Bihari, and when that man finally encounters her in her travels and proposes marriage, she accepts his love and respect but spares him the social censure of marrying a widow. She offers to engage herself in one of his philanthropic missions instead.

Director Rituparno Ghosh (1963-), one of the leading contemporary intellectuals and filmmakers from Kolkata, India, is markedly influenced by Tagore as is evident in his sustained use of Tagore's songs and poems to unfold themes in his films. Ghosh's canon also reveals a continued interest in women's issues and rights and more recently a focus on gay sexuality.

His film *Chokher Bali* departs from Tagore's original story in two significant ways. First, as addressed above, Ghosh unhesitatingly explores the dimension of passion in Binodini's life. To do this, he draws on the relationship between Binod and Mahendra, but imbues this relationship with a strong erotic charge. Next, even though he retains and presents Binodini's romantic interest in Behari, at the close of his *Chokher Bali*, Binodini is spoken of as having left for an unspecified destination of her choosing. In representing her in this way, unlike in the Tagore text where she spares Bihari social rebuke and yet stays committed to him, Ghosh returns to his investment in women's rights and autonomy.

However, similar to Tagore's depiction, in his film, Ghosh represents Binodini as quite the opposite of the generally voiceless and acquiescent traditional Bengali widow. In an early scene of *Chokher Bali*, she comes across as almost malevolent as she refrains from pouring the water that will help her *soi*,[7] Ashalata, wash off from her face the soap and excess *sindoor*—the red powder, worn on the parting, that is the most explicit traditional marker of marriage for Hindus in India. As the bewildered Ashalata pleads for the water with eyes closed, the audience sees an apparently wicked smile flicker over Binodini's face, but this, of course, could be more than pleasure that Binodini derives from her friend's pain.

Ashalata crosses over into the space of the widow.

The picnic in *Chokher Bali*.

The characters' conversation about socio-political issues underscores Ghosh's commitment to women's rights.

Inhabiting a space where all things desirable are withheld from her, despite her youth and remarkable beauty, this gesture could be read as one of Binodini's first attempts to draw the pampered wife into that unredeemed zone of denial that was the widow's reality.[8]

Here Ghosh has Asha occupy the center of the frame, while Binodini is positioned to her side. The scene has us focus on the easy mobility of Asha's fingers as she quickly soaps and rinses her face while Binodini's gestures are deliberately presented as slow and meditative, drawing the spectator's gaze towards her face and its expressions. It is also noteworthy that Asha's face is often covered in this scene while we are never allowed to lose sight of Binodini's. Thus even as the framing of the scene situates the privileged wife at the center, it is Binodini, one of the peripheral figures in the scene, who ultimately commands our attention through her expressions and temporary act of denial.

Foreshadowing transgression with echoes from Ray

There are, however, other instances in which if not Binodini, then the director himself calls for a crossover into the space of the widow. In this regard, it is important to mention that Rituparno Ghosh is one director who is unhesitating in using key motifs and echoes from Satyajit Ray's films to help unfold themes in his own.[9] Thus, the picnic scenes in *Chokher Bali*, in which Binodini swings and Ashalata pushes the swing, cannot fail to remind the viewer of Charu, the female lead and neglected wife of Ray's film *Charulata/The Lonely Wife* (1964), based on a short story "Noshtoneer" also by Tagore, whose feet rise progressively farther from the ground as she swings. Soon after, she begins to feel the illicit love for her husband's cousin, Amal. In a relationship in which there will be no physical consummation, Ray foreshadows for the audience Charu's emotional and imaginative transgression through the shot of her feet leaving the solid realm of the real.[10]

A quick contextualization of Ray's *Charulata* is helpful here. Satyajit Ray (1921-1992) brought international recognition to Bengali cinema. He first received critical acclaim for his Apu Trilogy—*Pather Panchali/The Song of the Road*, *Aparajito/The Unvanquished*, and *Apur Sansar/The World of Apu*—made from the mid to late-1950s. Ray's later films often focused on the urban middle class with the lure of corruption in city life being a recurrent theme. [See also Note 13]

Charulata is generally regarded as a Ray classic. It illustrates Ray's superbly sensitive treatment of a wife's initial isolation and consequent emotional "betrayal" of her husband as she develops a romantic interest for his cousin. Charu's husband, Bhupati, who belongs to the privileged upper class, is preoccupied with a newspaper he publishes and with political issues during British colonial rule in late-nineteenth century Kolkata. His cousin, Amal, who arrives as a guest at his house shares with Charu a deep interest in literature. Their bond deepens with their discussions about literature and about each other's writing. The swing sequence captures one such discussion and the beginning of Charu's romantic interest in Amal. With the publication of her first piece, however, Charu implies to Amal that her writing is of little significance compared to her feelings for him. Amal leaves, terrified of betraying his cousin. Charu is devastated and able to effect no more than a partial compromise with her husband and hence the

significance of Tagore's title for his story "Noshtoneer"/"The Broken (or Defiled) Nest."

In contrast, Rituparno Ghosh's film in later scenes involving Binodini and Mahendra clearly takes the viewer into the area of physical passion (interestingly, as indicated earlier, the sub-title of *Chokher Bali* is *A Passion Play*). However, the swing scene, as it reverberates with echoes from *Charulata*, is an early indication that the characters will move beyond the prescriptive boundaries of a socially-sanctioned love or existence.

Yet, if I go back to my earlier point, how, exactly, do the picnic scenes encourage a crossover into the space inhabited by the widow, Binodini? A song written by Tagore (*Rabindrasangeet*) that Ghosh uses in this scene is one that Binodini and Ashalata sing with ease together in the swing sequence. But is also one that could, nonetheless, point to the sharp difficulties in communication between a wife and a widow. The song, easily recognizable and much loved by a Bengali audience, has the first four lines:

> *Purano shei diner kotha*
> *Bhulbi kire haye*
> *o shei chokher dekha, praner kotha*
> *Sheo ki bhola jaye.*

The above lines are broadly translatable as "O, will you forget / those old times; / is it possible to forget / how we saw each other, how we exchanged intimate talk?"[11]

The middle verses of the song, those heard most distinctly in the picnic scenes of the film, are as follows:

> *Mora bhorer belaye*
> *Phool tulechi dulechi dolaye*
> *Bajiye bashi gan geyechi*
> *Bokuler tolaye.*
>
> *Haye majhe holo chhara chhari*
> *Gelem ke kothaye*
> *Abar dekha jodi holo shokha*
> *Praner majhe aye.*

Translated, the above lines are

> "We have picked flowers at dawn, / swung on the swing, / played the flute and sung / under the *bokul* tree."
>
> "Somewhere in between, there was separation; / and no knowing where we went. / If we have met again, my friend, / come in the midst of the heart."

Ghosh's film dramatizes, on screen, the action embedded in the song in that the friends gather flowers, swing, and sing. But of course, Binodini and Ashalata did not know each other before so that there is no question of a separation, and Ghosh's insertion of this song in a scene very reminiscent of *Charulata* seems to move it beyond its simple meaning of longing for union between friends (or lovers) temporarily separated. The earlier film focused on Charu's desire that remains largely unspoken and unrealized due to the constraints of her household; because of Amal's hasty departure without letting Charu know; and because of Charu's own sense of commitment to her husband, Bhupati. Just as Ghosh uses the swing to

bring together the transgressive desires of Charu and Binodini, so also he uses the song to evoke possibilities of communication between women (such as Charu and Binodini) who are thwarted and repressed in a normative culture. In addressing intertextuality in Ray and Ghosh's canons, Mandakranta Bose observes that *Chokher Bali* takes its place in a "line of cinema set by Satyajit Ray when he made *Charulata* . . . ." She continues that it is reasonable to assume that in making *Chokher Bali*,

> "Ghosh has deliberately tried to follow Ray . . . by choosing a story about a woman's gradual recognition of autonomy denied" (Bose 2007, 196).[12]

If contextualized within the specific concerns of *Chokher Bali* itself, the song calls for fullness of dialogue between the wife and the widow; between Bengali women who occupy two distinctly different spaces within the socio-cultural matrix, one replete with privileges while the other merely indicating deprivation.

And yet, through its third verse, quoted and translated above, the song also adumbrates the rift between Binodini and Ashalata once the former becomes the object of Ashalata's husband, Mahendra's erotic desire. Further, instead of just expressing a wish for re-union of friends parted for unspecified reasons, in this film, the song looks ahead to the last scenes in which Ashalata, despite clear knowledge of what can be seen as Binodini's betrayal, asks if she has left any address behind.

The song ends with the verse:

> *Aye arektibar aye re shokha*
> *Praner majhe aye*
> *Mora shukher dukher kotha kobo*
> *Pran jurabe taye.*

And the above lines can be translated as,

> "Come one more time, come my friend, / in the midst of my heart; / we will talk of happiness, we will talk of pain, / and the heart will be filled."

Within the parameters of *Chokher Bali*, Ashalata and Binodini never meet again, but if the use of Tagore's song is Ghosh's mediated wish for communication between these two women, then it certainly foreshadows Ashalata's openness to that possibility at the end of the film.

Moreover, because Ghosh persistently makes so evident the inter-textual connections between his films and Ray's, such lines of the song as "Aye arektibar aye re shokha / praner majhe aye" ("Come one more time, come my friend, / in the midst of my heart") can be read as the younger director's invocation or expression of indebtedness to a director who brought to Bengali cinema a tenor of seriousness not seen hitherto and simultaneously helped to internationalize it on a generally significant scale. In this regard, the word "shokha" is particularly relevant as in Bengali, it means "male friend," although within the context of Ghosh's film, the word signifies in a non-gendered way. What I read, on one level, as Ghosh's invoking of Ray assumes added importance as he continues to direct film after film centered on women's issues, an endeavor seen in several Ray films such as *Mahanagar*/*The Big City* (1963), *Nayak*/*The Hero (*1966), *Aranyer Din Ratri*/*Days and Nights in the Forest* (1969), and *Pratidwandi*/*The Adversary* (1970).[13]

Within the picnic scenes of *Chokher Bali* itself, the dialogue solidifies for the audience Ghosh's concerns about charting, through cinema, the progressive increase in women's rights in early-twentieth century Bengal. Things that the characters talk about include Binodini's vocalized interest in attending meetings of nationalist protest; her mention of the radical Bengali activist Ram Mohan Roy finally stopping *satidaha*;[14] and Mahendra's, albeit sarcastic, reference to both the cessation of *satidaha* and introduction of widow remarriage. [15] The above moments in the dialogue also substantiate my reading that the use of Tagore's song in this sequence connotes more than just a parting and re-union between any two people and is one of Ghosh's endeavors to have us re-think the traditional space of the widow in Bengali (Indian) culture.

Desire and the specters of orthodoxy

The housewife's sporadic visual pleasure: Charu, in *Charulata*, looks at ...

Although resonant with echoes from *Charulata*, a specific way in which *Chokher Bali* diverges from the former film is in its unreserved exploration of sexuality. Like Ray, Ghosh uses binoculars (field glasses) as a connotative device. With Ray, in an early scene of *Charulata*, Charu uses binoculars in her alienation and frustration to gaze on the streets of Kolkata,[16] but their particular significance is that they provide sporadic visual pleasure to the housewife.[17] [open endnotes in new window] In contrast, by having Binodini at her window use binoculars to search frantically for signs of sexual intimacy in Ashalata and Mahendra's room, Ghosh recharges this sign not only to underscore the severe limitations in the widow's existence, but to also make clear that Bengali film has moved to a point where a serious and unreserved addressing of her (repressed) sexuality is in order.[18]

... Kolkata streets through the binoculars.

In several sequences of *Chokher Bali*, two elements that Ghosh reiteratively yokes together are the force of desire and the spectral presence of the dead husband. Even in the first scene of passion between Binodini and Mahendra, Binodini makes pointed, and what appears perverse, reference to her dead spouse. "My husband died of tuberculosis,"[19] she tells Mahendra, who draws back immediately from caressing and kissing her. However, she is testing more than his courage about contagion as she laughs in his face. Throughout *Chokher Bali*, Ghosh clearly presents Binodini as supremely skeptical of Mahendra's ability to break with tradition and do what is daring or unconventional. Further, by repeatedly bringing the dead into the realm of the erotic, Binodini mocks and yet underlines the stubborn persistence of specters that define the widow's existence. The dead husband is on spectre, of course, also the innumerable restrictive stipulations of orthodox Hinduism that will not be put to rest and which vitiate or obstruct the erotic in the life of a widow. This haunting of *eros* by *thanatos* seems endless to Binodini.

Ray's representation of a housewife's loneliness and boredom in late-nineteenth century Kolkata in *Charulata*.

In a carriage scene in which Ghosh explicitly depicts passion between the two characters, Binodini again drags her dead husband into her conversation with Mahendra. As she deliberately smears his shirt with the *sindoor* from *Kalighat*[20] that he has accidentally gotten on her forehead during an embrace, he chides her affectionately because it will be difficult to erase the red powder. In response, Binodini says undeterred,

> "Is it possible that you will meet with me" [the Bengali word *songo*—"meet" is not an exact equivalent for this—is alternately translatable as "keep company with me"] but leave no sign? Don't you see, so long ago, I kept company with [or "was united with"] [my husband] who is dead and a ghost, and yet, for all these years, I bear with me that sign" [or "mark"]?

But of course, within the context of early-twentieth century Bengali masculinist culture, the two predicaments are not comparable. In general

Charu looks at Amal.

Imaginative "transgression" and the beginnings of a romantic interest.

Ghosh's unreserved exploration of Binodini's sexual needs and his re-charging of the binoculars as sign: Binodini, in *Chokher Bali*, gazes at ...

the agents[21] or even more passive elements, of such a culture would facilitate Mahendra's erasing of the "sign" of his illicit involvement with Binodini but would unrelentingly uphold the necessity of her austere existence, which signified Binodini's widowhood until her death. Even as she determinedly "marks" Mahendra with the "sign" of their passion, Binodini is aware that this passion cannot compete with the force of the "sign" that makes her captive to her spectral husband. In the cultural context of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Bengal, her widowhood has always already won over any *eros* that might enter her present or future life.

In one of the later scenes of *Chokher Bali*, when Mahendra leaves home to come to Binodini who has moved to her native village, en route to *Kashi*, she says to him as he is about to sit on the bed,

> "That is my marriage bed. It is on that bed that he [my husband] died."

Once again, she deliberately introduces the dead husband into a context charged with intimacy. However, what is more interesting is that through this act, she seems to forestall the possibility of passion between herself and Mahendra, almost instinctively guarding against any future disillusionment when Hindu society itself would stand against it.

The corpse of the widow and film as "historically situated" dialogue

Other than through the character Binodini, as director Ghosh uses different strategies to juxtapose romance/passion in the widow's life with death. Once they are in *Kashi*, for instance, talk about a child between Binodini and Mahendra (even though the two are talking at cross purposes: she about his child that Ashalata carries and he about a child with her) is followed by a sequence in which Binodini is visibly agitated by the death of a widow on the banks of the Ganges. Furthermore, the doctor who confirms this death is Behari, who Binodini believes has a romantic interest in her.[22] As the two stare at each other, across the widow's dead body, Behari inquires where Mahendra is. Binodini asks with a smile of anticipation, "Haven't you come to me?" Behari informs her that Mahendra's mother (another widow in the film) has passed away in Kolkata and reiterates his query about Mahendra.

Ghosh's cinematic construction of this sequence is telling. The shot-reverse shots bring us both Behari and Binodini but accentuate for the spectator the sheer pleasure on Binod's face as she seems to block out the signifiers of death all around her on this burning ghat (a bank of the Ganges where bodies are cremated). In quick contrast, the shots of Behari's face convey beautifully the duality of his experience of bringing bad news and the unexpected pleasure of seeing Binodini. What is also noteworthy about this sequence is that although Behari sits very close to the corpse as he stares at Binodini, the body of the dead widow is always kept out of frame during the exchange of glances. This invisibility yet proximity of death in a late sequence of *Chokher Bali* underscores once again for the audience that the possibility of romance in a widow's life is framed by obstacles that are not always explicit.

... Asha and Mahendra's room through the binoculars.

The haunting of eros by the "specters" of death: Binodini mocks Mahendra ...

... in the first scene of passion.

Binodini marks Mahendra with ...

When Behari finally proposes marriage to Binodini, the background of the scene is intermittently lit up by funeral pyres, one of which happens to be that of the widow whose death Binodini has recently witnessed. This is evident to the viewer because the red shawl that had covered the body of the dying widow is now worn by another widow who limps around the funeral pyre, possibly in hopes of getting exactly such discarded items before the body is set on fire. The Indian viewer understands that the red shawl is used, in both cases, only for purposes of providing warmth; it is not appropriate attire for the Hindu widow. It is supremely ironic that Binodini had previously, in *Kashi*, asked Mahendra if he would buy her a red shawl that she liked. Mahendra expressed his disapproval, red being associated with brides in the Hindu context and white with widows. Ghosh signifies the utter futility of such desire as Binodini's by using a red shawl to cover the body of an unconscious widow about to exit life or by transferring it to the body of another aged widow whose existence seems to revolve around seeking disposable goods around funeral pyres. No more an object of desire, the red shawl finally figures as shroud for bodies marked by deprivation.[23]

As *Chokher Bali* draws to its close then, it is no longer the specter of the long-dead husband that Binodini drags into moments marked by passion or the possibility of passion. In these last sequences of the film, Rituparno Ghosh focuses squarely on the corpse of the widow itself, the raw reality of the female body that has lived and died in deprivation, something Binodini must look at up close, as ominous as that may be to her. For it is not so much her understanding of the *cause* (i.e. the dead masculine that lives to haunt), but her confrontation of the female body that bears the *effects* (i.e. herself and others similar to herself) that moves her towards validating passion all throughout the film and at its end. Such an understanding enables her to reject the confines of the domestic realm in which she had largely been situated.

Thus, even as he portrays her as fully cognizant of the odds stacked against her, in transferring Binodini's story to screen in the early-twenty first century, when feminist struggles have left and leave their mark in most world cultures, Ghosh presents this protagonist as willing and able to manipulate the "immobility" of the "mark" that is her widowhood. Looking at how such social commentary works in fiction film, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam draw on a Bakhtinian concept of art and discuss the ways film is "social" precisely because it is a "historically situated 'utterance'" communicated by one subject(s) to others in a particular historical moment. They argue that with film, what is more important than its representation of a "preexisting truth or reality" is that it is "an act of contextualized interlocution between socially situated producers and listeners" (Shohat and Stam 1994, 180). In much of his work, Ghosh tellingly locates his characters within the context of "a historically situated 'utterance'" rather than demonstrate "fidelity to a preexisting truth or reality."[24]

For instance, in the same carriage scene that I discussed earlier, long before their arrival in *Kashi*, Binodini tells Mahendra that she left home for *Kalighat* saying,

... the sign of their passion ...

... and yet is only too aware of the long shadow cast by death ...

... and how desire loses out to it.

Ghosh ruptures "tradition" and works against potential objectification of the Indian widow. Binodini "uses" Kalighat and her widowhood for passion.

"[Today] is my husband's death day.[25] For the first time, I have been able to take advantage of my widowhood."

Ghosh is clearly not interested in upholding (the value of) patriarchal constructs that prove to be generally constrictive or detrimental to women. [26] That Ghosh makes Binodini "use" her widowhood to gain erotic pleasure illustrates Benjamin's concept of "a shattering of tradition." In a similar kind of critique, Shohat and Stam note that in Third Worldist film simply

> "the exaltation of 'the national' provides no criteria for distinguishing what is worth retaining in the 'national tradition.' A sentimental defense of patriarchal social institutions simply because they are 'ours' can hardly be seen as emancipatory" (1994, 286).[27]

However, it is more than an aspect of Bengali and Hindu cultural tradition that Ghosh challenges by giving Binodini this kind of subversive agency in his film. It is quite likely that he also attempts to reverse broad global perceptions about the Indian widow, as I mentioned earlier. Not only does Indian culture have traditional perspectives on widowhood, but an international perspective often objectifies third world women as well. In addition, as a filmmaker, Ghosh also has to deal with the objectification that characterizes the international culture of mediated visuality. Rey Chow in *Primitive Passions* has taken up this problem at length, understanding that non-Western film directors must somehow work through cinema's reduction to "objecthood" as they use visuality to construct subjectivities. Chow writes:

> "What is needed, after the ethical polemic of Saïd's *Orientalism* is understood, is the much more difficult task of investigating how visuality operates in the postcolonial politics of non-Western cultures besides the subjection to passive spectacle that critics of orientalism argue . . . . What does it mean for non-Western intellectuals to live as "subjects" and "agents" in the age of 'the world as exhibition?'" (1995, 13)[28]

Looking back to Edward Saïd, Chow understands that the East is *not* just a spectacle but also involved in the "dialectic of seeing" (1995, 13). Here we are, of course, reminded of passages in *Orientalism*. In one such passage, as he discusses Arab literature, Saïd speaks of how a literary text might combat orientalist objectification:

> "Its force is not that it is Arab, or French, or English; its force is in the power and vitality of words that, to mix in Flaubert's metaphor from *La Tentation de Saint Antoine*, tip the idols out of the Orientalists' arms and make them drop those great paralytic children—which are their ideas of the Orient—that attempt to pass for the Orient. " (1979, 291) [29]

Although Saïd, here, speaks of a literary text (rather than a film), again his argument is that the East has its own agency, its own "dialectic of seeing."

In *Primitive Passions*, Chow extends such a notion of subjectivity and dynamism further in order to consider visual culture. She writes:

Binodini brings the specter of ...
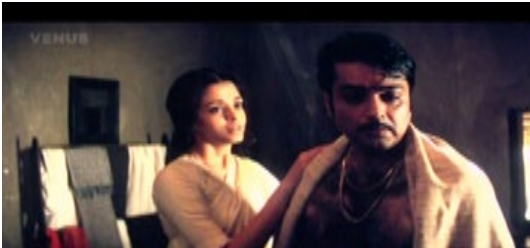
... the dead husband into an intimate context.

Binodini, the corpse, and the lived reality of the widow: Binodini hears of the widow's death.

Behari confirms the widow's death.

"How are the 'subjective origins' of the previously ethnographized communicated in *visual* terms? They are, I think, communicated not so much through the act of looking as through what may be called "to-be-looked-at-ness"—the visuality that once defined the "object" status of the ethnographized culture and that now becomes a predominant aspect of that culture's self-representation. (1995, 180)[30]

What Chow means here is that non-Western film directors must somehow work with this the reduction to "objecthood" as they use visuality to construct subjectivities. Thus, "to-be-looked-at-ness" would be a condition used deliberately and strategically by cinema directors to underscore past objectification of non-Western cultural subjects. The specter of such objectification is always present in *Chokher Bali*, particularly with its parallel narrative of other widows' lives and the possibility of what Binodini would become in the absence of her dynamism. Yet Ghosh also unhesitatingly provides a new or alternative representation of the Bengali widow, one that foregrounds her desire for pleasure rather than her submissiveness to social forces that work to efface that pleasure. Further, he brings us Binodini's "exploitation" of the *static* aspects of Hindu widowhood. As acting (and assertive) subject within a "technologized visuality" (Chow 1995, 6), Binodini opens up for question any single or dominant world perception of a Bengali widow. Furthermore, as a "non-Western [intellectual]" directing films in "the age of 'the world as exhibition'" (Chow 1995, 13), Ghosh, in my view, provides us with an exciting version of Bengali "culture's self-representation" (Chow 1995, 180). In his film, Binodini refuses to be an "immobile" object, positioned and restrained by Hindu orthodoxy, or the kind of widow who according to the Western ethnographic gaze needs some form of redemption. Instead, she is ready to reverse and re-write her own given predicament as well as to some extent that of others in a similar situation.

Effects of British colonialism and women's solidarity

It is not surprising that Binodini's last letter to Ashalata, delivered to the latter by Behari, after her disappearance from *Kashi*,[31] urges Ashalata to conceptualize a world beyond the interiors of the second floor of Darjipara Street—those domestic spaces encompassing kitchen, half-eaten food, courtyard, and shutters in which the two had pledged friendship to each other. And because Mahendra was the one man both had known, they both tried to fulfill their desire through him. But of course, this ruptured their world, leaving their little "country," as Binodini calls it,[32] in pieces. Binodini reminds Ashalata to look further than that, that once she stood on the banks of the Ganges in *Kashi*, she understood that there was a world beyond the interiority of Darjipara Street.

In this last section of *Chokher Bali*, Ghosh foregrounds once again Binodini's awareness of India's (and, in particular, Bengal's) political predicament. For in the letter to Ashalata, Binod warns Asha of the British Viceroy Lord Curzon's plan for the Partition of Bengal. (This would separate the eastern part of Bengal, from the province itself, and add it to Assam).[33] If put into effect, Binod and Asha would live in different "countries," because, it is to be assumed, the former would no longer be in the vicinity of Kolkata, located in the western section of Bengal.[34] To

Binodini and Behari stare at each other ...

... across the widow's dead body.

Behari sits close to the corpse, which is kept out of frame, as he gazes at Binodini.

The many barriers in romance for a Hindu widow and the invisibility yet closeness of death: The proposal scene is lit up by funeral pyres.

recapitulate, the relegation of the Hindu widow to prescribed social spaces, devoid of the possibility of passion, not only intensified Binodini's desire but also caused the rift with her *soi*, Ashalata. However, Ghosh shows how the position of the female subject in early-twentieth century Bengal was not just determined by a national patriarchal vision but weakened further by the effects of British colonialism. For the rupture in the bond between her and Ashalata seems deeper and more ominous to Binodini because now, there also looms the possibility of a permanent geographical hiatus between them. The fragmentation of their "country," their female space as each other's *soi*, is mirrored externally in the potential fragmentation of Bengal by a foreign power.

Yet, just as Ashalata, by asking if Binodini has left any address behind, remains open to the possibility of communication with her, so Binodini in this last letter to her *soi* suggests to Ashalata that they should move beyond their sense of insults, sadness, and deprivation that they both had felt, confined within the (prescribed) women's spaces of Darjipara Street. For, if situated in their potentially separate[d] "countries," they focused on these, then they already lost to Lord Curzon. If, however, they looked at the "country within" and stood by their pledge of eternal friendship to each other, it would be impossible for Lord Curzon to teach them a lesson.

At the close of *Chokher Bali* then, Ghosh looks to the solidarity of women not only as a force against the stipulations and injustices of Hindu patriarchy but as a shield against the divisive strategies of British colonialism in India. In the face of such fragmentation, the references in Binodini's letter to Abhimanyu and the Ganges, the first a young undaunted warrior of the Indian epic *The Mahabharata*[35] and the second the sacred river of India, solidify for the viewers the Bengali women's faith in national symbols that provide strength.[36] Binodini writes to Ashalata that The Mahabharata says that Abhimanyu grew to be a considerable warrior in his mother's womb, and the child Ashalata carries bathed everyday in the Ganges with her (during Ashalata's stay in *Kashi*). The implication is clear that blest by the sacred waters of the Ganges, Ashalata's child could grow to be a warrior, a fighter undeterred. Ghosh moves fluidly between concepts of threatened geo-political spaces and empowering women's spaces at the end of *Chokher Bali* as Binod concludes her letter, pleading with Asha not to keep her child confined to the interiority of Darjipara Street, whether it is a boy or a girl. The last line of her letter translates,

"You will see, s(he)[37] will teach you what 'country' is."

Perhaps the text of Binodini's letter conflates nationalist imperatives with issues of urgent importance for women. It is difficult to not hear in it a sub-text: Bengali anguish over partitioning of land; warnings against native (individual) schisms; calls for unity and a militant spirit; also a marked patriotism, particularly in the repeated use of the word *desh*/country. However, despite its mammoth and devastating economic and political effects, in this letter, colonialism is used as a springboard to move to issues that affect Bengali women's everyday lives in a more immediate sense. In prioritizing the female quotidian realm over the colonial predicament, Ghosh effects yet another reversal in *Chokher Bali*. Even though the

The red shawl as shroud.

Imperiled geo-political spaces and spaces of female friendship and solidarity: Asha reads Binodini's last letter and inquires about her address.

national political conversation, especially as filtered through the character of Behari, remains a persistent strain in the film, it is situated as peripheral to Binodini and Ashalata's lives.[38] As Ghosh adeptly shifts from the discourse around colonialism to the specific context of women's lives, his achievement reminds me of Adrienne Rich's admonishing observation at the end of her essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Revision (1971)":

> "'Political' poetry by men remains stranded amid the struggles for power among male groups; in condemning U.S. imperialism or the Chilean junta the poet can claim to speak for the oppressed while remaining, as male, part of a system of sexual oppression. The enemy is always outside the self, the struggle somewhere else. (1979, 49)"[39]

As a committed feminist, Ghosh understands how historically such "political" conversations have taken precedence over discussion of the difficulties of women's daily lives. (This is not to minimize the importance of such "political" conversations or see the two issues as necessarily mutually exclusive). In this film, in a final reversal at the end, we see that Curzon's territorialism is subordinated to Binodini's vision of *desh*/country as suggested to Ashalata.

Such a vision is also more inclusive than one which, to put it simplistically, would address the Indian nationalist effort but ignore or subsume the particular difficulties or impediments of certain groups within the sub-continent.[40] As mentioned earlier, Binodini is interested in the freedom struggle and very cognizant of how Bengal is threatened by Curzon's plans. However, at the end of her letter to Ashalata, she focuses on Bengali women's freedom from confining domestic spaces and the concept of a nation/*desh* that is both an independent India and a more liberating terrain for women. Her message to Ashalata that the latter's child could grow to be a warrior together with her closing thought—"You will see, s(he) will teach you what 'country' is"—illustrate simultaneous notions of a freedom fighter and a subject who will bring to her (his) mother a sense of a fuller world for women. It is no accident that Ghosh has Binodini attempt to frame nationalist concerns and women's issues within a maternal perspective, a perspective that she herself, in all likelihood, will never be able to concretize. The director's use of the lens of motherhood at the end of *Chokher Bali* brings us back squarely to the spaces of the female quotidian, for Ghosh a vital area to explore in cinema.

Go to Notes page

Notes

1. A version of this essay, with the same title, was originally presented as a paper at the National Women's Studies Association Convention in Cincinnati in June, 2008. [return to page 1 of essay]

2. See Benjamin(2008).

3. A more elaborate discussion of this notion may be found in John Berger. In *Ways of Seeing*, Berger speaks of cameras and television screens "reproducing" paintings. These reproductions then enter viewers' homes and are framed by their contexts. See Berger (1972, 19-20).

4. *Chokher Bali* was published serially in the Bengali magazine *Bangadarshan.*

5. See Sangita Gopal, *Conjugations: Marriage and Form in New Bollywood Cinema,* Chapter 5 for another reading of Ghosh's representation. Among other things, Gopal argues that Ghosh moves away from the

> "tradition of the 'literary' film that attempted to reproduce the novel's interiorized 'vision' of the subject. The new Bengali cinema, of which *Chokher Bali* is exemplary, has no qualms about representing the subject as sheer exteriority" (176). See Gopal (2011).

6. I am also indebted here to Rey Chow's line of thought in a section of *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography and Contemporary Chinese Cinema.* Chow draws on Benjamin's essay "The Task of the Translator" to posit how just as translation releases an "'intention' of standing-for-something-else" that is "imprisoned . . . in the original" (187), so some contemporary Chinese cinema, such as films by Zhang Yimou, by focusing on so-called "primitive" subjects, exhibits/explores the cruelty of certain aspects of Chinese tradition (47, 202). In this reading, Chow, of course, sees cinema itself as a form of translation, an idea that applies to Ghosh's making of *Chokher Bali* in a similar but also different way. See Chow (1995).

7. The word *soi*, a Bengali one, literally translatable as "friend" needs a bit of explanation. *Soi patano* refers to the practice, among Bengali girls or women, of very deliberately forming a friendship, with the friends often bestowing special names of affection, such as *Chokher Bali*, on each other. There is a clear and mutual sense of commitment in these friendships, an understanding

that the friends will stand by each other, no matter what the circumstances. In Tagore's novel and in Ghosh's film, Binodini and Ashalata become each other's *soi* soon after the former's arrival into the household that is Ashalata's home after marriage.

8. In *The Nation and Its Fragments*, Partha Chatterjee gives us the impressions of a mid-nineteenth century Bengali married woman, Kailasbasini Debi, who notes in her diary that "widows are traditionally restricted to a hard life devoid of luxury in order to make them unattractive to men, so they do not become objects of their lust" (146). Chatterjee does clarify for us that Kailasbasini's views, as in this case, were often "rationalist" ones used to justify "traditional beliefs and customs" (146). See Chatterjee (1993). The deprivation in the life of a widow in a Bengali household is also addressed in the opening paragraphs of Tagore's renowned short story "The Living and the Dead." See Tagore (2000). A recent film with striking scenes that highlight the contrasts in the life of a widow and other married women (and unmarried young girls), in the twentieth century Indian colonial context, is, of course, Deepa Mehta's *Water*. Perhaps the most poignant of such scenes are ones that underscore these contrasts in the lives of very young girls, even children.

9. In the opening sequence of *Utsab/Festival* (2000), for instance, we are told through a voiceover that the utensils that will be used for Durga Puja, in the house whose courtyard the camera roams over, were used by Ray in his film *Devi/The Goddess* (1960). We are also told that Ray visited this particular house. Whether these are facts or fiction remains unclear. Whereas *Devi* and Ray are merely mentioned in *Utsab, Devi* itself has obvious connections with another, more recent, Ghosh film—*Antarmahal/Views of the Inner Chamber* (2005).

In *Antarmahal*, the rustic sculptor, Brij Bhushan, reputed for his clay images and replicas, and chosen to sculpt the image of Durga in the *zamindar's* (landed gentry) house, falls in love with the *zamindar's* beautiful second wife. On the designated day of worship, when the image is unveiled, the face of the goddess is seen to be a replica of that of the *zamindar's* wife. The displacement of romantic or erotic attraction onto the divine in this Ghosh film is clearly reminiscent of themes in Ray's *Devi*. In the latter film, Doyamoyee, the younger daughter-in-law of Kalikinkar's household, is accorded the status of Ma/Devi/Goddess after she is seen as a reincarnation of the Goddess Kali in a dream by Kalikinkar. As per the instructions of her father-in-law, she is regularly worshipped in the household, a practice that eventually destroys the romantic and erotic relationship between her and her husband, Umaprasad.

10. I am grateful to my long-time friend Asit Roy for alerting me to this during one of our conversations in Kolkata in the early eighties.

11. In order to convey the best possible meaning I am able to, I am not necessarily translating these or the following lines of the song in sequence.

12. See Bose (2007). However, in a short reflective piece on *Chokher Bali* published in Kolkata shortly after its release, Amit Chaudhuri notes that these

borrowings from Ray—the swing sequence and the binoculars (to be discussed shortly following in my article)—do not fit into the texture of the film. He observes,

> ". . . these moments, like cockatoos or imported eunuchs, are neither at home and nor do they have anywhere else to go." See Chaudhuri (2003).

13. In *Aranyer Din Ratri*, one of the female characters, Jaya, is a modern day widow, who, nonetheless, still chooses to dress mostly in white sarees (white being the color traditionally worn by widows in India. Actually, since Ray's film is in black and white, it is difficult to say whether these are, in fact, white sarees or simply light-colored ones). As an unspoken love interest begins to develop between her and one of the male characters, Sanjoy, in the film, Ray gives us a sequence in which she dons a dark-colored saree and elaborate jewelry and inquires of him how she looks and whether he is afraid. In general, widows wore no jewelry to underscore the austerity of their existence. Her over-adorning of herself suggests the extent of desires she has repressed to conform to tradition. Her breaking down in tears at the end of the sequence and escaping alone to her room implies the temporary nature of this "transgression." In *Chokher Bali*, Ghosh also weaves in a sequence in which Binodini, at the insistence of Ashalata, puts on elaborate jewelry, another instance of an echo from Ray's canon.

In *Mahanagar*, Ray details the experiences of a Bengali housewife, Arati, from a conservative family, who decides to find a job because of the household's financial difficulties. Arati has the force of character to give up her job, at the end of the film, when a colleague is unfairly dismissed. She does this in spite of the fact that her husband has no job at this point. Ray's *Nayak*, although majorly focused on the character of film actor Arindam Mukherjee, has as its female lead Aditi Sengupta, an editor of a women's journal, who is traveling from Kolkata to New Delhi to attempt to get a grant for this journal. Similarly, although *Pratidwandi* is centered on the character of Siddhartha Chaudhuri, a sub-plot addresses the allegations against his sister, Sutapa, an attractive woman who has found a lucrative job which helps out her family financially after the father's death.

14. *Satidaha* was the practice in which a Hindu widow burnt to death on the funeral pyre of her husband in order to prove she was *sati* (the perfect, chaste wife). Some widows chose to do this voluntarily, while others were forced to become *sati*. Whether suicide or collective killing of women, *sati* showed the entrenched patriarchal power structure and ideology. In Bengal, the nineteenth century social reformer Ram Mohan Roy worked vigorously to abolish *sati*. For a comprehensive discussion of debates surrounding a recent occurrence of *sati* in India as also artistic representations of and postcolonial feminist positions on *sati*, see Rajan (1993, 15-63).

15. It is perhaps relevant to note here that Tagore's depiction of the picnic scene in his novel includes no mention of such issues, although it is obvious that the novel itself captures Tagore's concerns about the position of the widow in Bengali culture. It is also necessary to mention that *sati* was outlawed in Bengal in 1829 by the British Governor-General William

Bentinck, and the Widow Remarriage Act was passed in 1856. In the picnic scenes of his film, Ghosh captures early-twentieth century responses to these issues, with a clear focus on Binodini's understanding of these much needed changes.

16. It is true that Charu later looks at Amal through the binoculars, but Ray focuses more on an incipient romantic interest rather than a markedly erotic one.

17. For a different comparative analysis of the significance of the binoculars in *Charulata* and *Chokher Bali*, see Gopal (2011, 169-72). Further, in a recent article on *Chokher Bali,* Kaustav Bakshi argues that in contrast to "classical" cinema which privileges the male gaze and renders women as spectacles, *Chokher Bali* by representing Binodini with the binoculars foregrounds the desiring female gaze and female agency. See Bakshi (2011).

18. Towards the end of *Chokher Bali*, Binodini again uses binoculars in *Kashi* (Benaras) only to see a very pregnant Ashalata, traumatizing evidence to her of Asha's relationship with Mahendra. Asha moves temporarily to *Kashi* with an aunt after she finds out about Mahendra and Binodini's betrayal.

19. All translations of dialogue from the film are mine.

20. *Kalighat* is a holy site in Kolkata where one of the toes of *Kali* (*Kali* is a manifestation of *Durga/Sati*)is reputed to have fallen during her husband, *Shiva*'s, enraged dance with her body, following their insult and *Sati*'s death at her father, *Daksha*'s religious ceremony, *Daksha Yajna*. (*Shiva* was not invited to the ceremony, and *Sati* was insulted when she attended).

After one offers prayers at *Kalighat*, one is given a little basket of *proshad* (flowers and sweets first offered to and believed to be blessed by the goddess). This basket also contains some *sindoor*, which has been applied to the goddess by the priest during worship on that day.

21. I am not thinking here of social reformers such as Ram Mohan Roy, who worked to abolish *satidaha*, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, whose endeavors led to the Widow Remarriage Act of 1856, and others who strove to improve the conditions of widows overall. In *Real and Imagined Women*, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan also makes the following very interesting observations on nineteenth century India:

> "Among the indigenous reformers, a sentimental affiliation to indigenous "tradition," the early stirrings of nationalism, and an acute recognition of the resistance of social forces to change, created a complex inheritance which considerably complicated the ideological stance towards issues relating to women. Thus while sati could be condemned on both humanitarian and religious grounds, the prescribed alternative for widows, ascetic celibacy, was not so easily opposed. Therefore the remarriage of widows, long after it was made legally permissible, was a practically non-existent practice. "(48)

Further, Rajan draws on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak? Speculations on Widow-Sacrifice" to note that

> "for Spivak, what is of 'greater significance' than the debate on sati is that 'there was no debate upon this exceptional fate of widows [i.e. celibacy] – either among Hindus or between Hindus and British'" (55). See Rajan (1993).

22. It should be mentioned here that Behari is educated, a radical thinker, and also actively involved in meetings of nationalist protest against the British.

23. In my 2009 interview with him, Ghosh mentioned that in one (released) version of *Chokher Bali*, Binodini is shown as having bought and wearing the red shawl that she wanted. According to Ghosh, when Tagore wrote the novel in the early-twentieth century, red was very likely a color associated with passion. However, one hundred years later, when Ghosh's film was released, red had also become a "symbol of rebellion" (Ghosh) as evident, if I may add, in different world political contexts. In this version mentioned by Ghosh, Binodini's giving of the red shawl to the dying widow thus associates her with red in a different way and suggests, according to Ghosh, her renunciation of passion, her statement that passion is not everything for her any longer. She wants to live in her own way, free of such ties.

24. Another point on cinematic representation made by Shohat and Stam in *Unthinking Eurocentrism* deserves mention here. They note:

> "The analysis of a film like *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985), sociologically flawed from a mimetic perspective—given its focus on wealthy Asians rather than more typically working-class Asians in London—alters considerably when regarded as a constellation of discursive strategies, as a provocative symbolic inversion of conventional expectations of a miserabilist account of Asian victimization." (181)

See Shohat and Stam (1994). In presenting Binodini as agentive, and, at times, aggressively so, Ghosh is, no doubt, thinking of a global audience interested in women's voices and rights and simultaneously reversing "conventional expectations," both in the national and world contexts, of a downtrodden or ultimately defeated Hindu widow.

25. It would be normal for a widow to visit *Kalighat* and offer prayers on such an occasion. In reality, Binodini leaves the house to indulge in a passionate encounter with Mahendra.

26. A point made by Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, in the Introduction to *Real and Imagined Women*, is worth mentioning here.

> ". . . but since [culture] is also heterogeneous, changing and open to interpretation, it can become a site of contestation and consequently of the reinscription of subjectivities. Therefore cultural analysis both calls forth the critique of ideology, and – given the crucial function of representation in the dialectic of

social process – enables political intervention, scenarios of change, theoretical innovation and strategic reinterpretations." (10)

See Rajan (1993). Ghosh seems to be involved in several of these projects, mentioned by Rajan, in his cinematic representations.

27. See Shohat and Stam (1994).

28. See Chow (1995).

29. See Saïd (1979).

30. See Chow (1995).

31. Binodini disappears on the day Behari comes to her house, ready to marry her, with all the necessary items for a Hindu wedding ceremony. She is gone when he arrives. In a separate letter to Behari, she says that she ran away so that there was no dearth in the wedding feast. In one of her last communications, then, Binodini presents herself as one eager to eat, another sharp reversal of the traditional image of the Hindu widow who withholds physical desires.

32. The Bengali word used by Binod here is *desh*, a word that often has patriotic undertones.

33. The Partition of Bengal was put into effect on October 16th, 1905. After considerable public protest, the Partition was revoked in 1911.

34. However, if Binodini is going to live in some part of a divided Bengal, it also implies that she has left *Kashi*, located outside of the province of Bengal, in northern India.

35. In the Mahabharata, Abhimanyu was the son of Arjuna by Subhadra and was tricked into single combat with the *Kauravas* inside of a *chakravyuha* (labyrinth) which he knew how to enter but not exit. Abhimanyu was killed in this encounter, in the *Kurukshetra* War, after fighting valiantly, and his death was avenged by his father, Arjuna.

36. For a much cited discussion of how the Indian nationalist movement saw women/the domestic realm as preserving the essence of the country's tradition and culture, see Chatterjee (1993, Chapter 6). I do not find Chatterjee's reading totally unproblematic.

37. The third person singular pronoun, *shey*, is not gendered in Bengali.

38. For a different response to Ghosh's treatment of the nation in *Chokher Bali*, see Bose (2007, 200-01). Bose comments on the ineffectiveness of the "woman-nation" metaphor in the film because

> "the nation is hardly visible and . . . because the politics never progresses beyond personal power struggles in the family" (200).

39. See Rich (1979).

40. In the film, Ghosh *does* show Behari to be both involved in the nationalist issues and sensitive to the predicament of women.

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President Sebastián Piñera's popularity had soared after the intense media coverage of the rescue of 33 trapped copper miners in 2010, and he soon announced a sweeping neoliberal reform of the education system. A year later, after a society-wide reaction against his plan, his popularity rating was around 20 percent.

The student leader Camila Vallejo at the protests during the Chilean winter of 2011. Photo: Diego Salinas Flores.

The Chilean Student Movement of 2011: Camila Vallejo and the media

by Matt Losada

When, on June 5, 2011, Camila Vallejo, president of the Federation of Students of the Universidad de Chile (FECH) and then-spokesperson for the Confederation of Chilean Students (Confech), was interviewed by the four hosts of the Chilean television program *Tolerancia Cero* (*Zero Tolerance*), the questions revolved around the student protest movement that was only beginning to make its presence felt.[1] [open endnotes in new window]

Her performance in the interview was impressive, considering that the 23-year old geography student faced at-times aggressive questioning from four nationally known intellectuals. The program provided a very visible platform—on an establishment medium—for the diffusion of a powerful image of the leader of the movement and a clear exposition of student demands, as the well-prepared and eloquent Vallejo countered one by one, with calmly reasoned responses, the arguments of Fernando Paulsen, Matías del Río, Fernando Villegas and Juan Carlos Eichholz.[2]

The Confech had organized student marches in April and May in response to the accelerated implementation, by the incoming conservative government of President Sebastián Piñera, of a neoliberal education policy that would require public universities to compete for state funding with private universities—a measure intended, according to Vallejo, to force the former to increase labor flexibility—and freeze funding for public low-interest student loan programs, thus driving students into higher-interest loans provided by private banks.[3] The Confech countered by calling for education to be treated as a right not a commodity, and demanding that the Chilean state privilege public education. Such policy changes would effectively shift the course of national education policy away from the neoliberal model that has dominated since the Pinochet period.[4]

Del Río opened the program by welcoming Vallejo as "Carla Vallejo," then referred to her as "Camila Vallejos," after which Eichholz—the youngest member of the panel and lawyer, member of the *Legión de Cristo*, professor of "Strategic Leadership" (Liderazgo Estratégico) at the private Universidad Adolfo Ibáñez and chief of Piñera's cabinet when he was a senator—started the questioning. This foremost official intellectual of local economic might proposed a role-play scenario:

> "Let's pretend you are the minister of education and you are charged with announcing reforms to the country's higher education system. Which are the central points you would propose in such a reform?"[5]

Unshaken by this stratagem, a cool Vallejo prefaced her answer by refocusing the debate on the insufficiencies of the current neoliberal approach used by the

During a two-day national strike in late August 2011 *carabineros* reacted with force but were sometimes on the defensive.

Camila Vallejo appeared on the Chilean interview program *Tolerancia Cero* on June 5, 2011.

The program opened by defining Vallejo as chief spokesperson for the student movement.

Chilean state:

> "The state is lacking in both its supervisory role and that of guarantor."[6]

Locating the problem in the state's fundamental unwillingness to regulate private enterprise in education and to carry out its constitutional mandate to provide quality public education, she went on to lay out the changes proposed by the students.

The hosts then went on to pose questions to Vallejo that basically amounted to a series of conservative talking points critical of the movement. Vallejo refuted each effectively, and at moments the frustration of Villegas and Eichholz became evident. Villegas insisted that the positions of the students today are following what he called the "classical ideological lines" ("líneas ideológicas clásicas") of the left of the past. The unspoken subtext is that this is the left of Salvador Allende that was destroyed by the violence of the Pinochet regime, a destruction that Villegas seemed to justify by voicing this accusation. He characterized that left position as the knee-jerk demonization of profit, before going on to defend today's private universities, first by way of anecdote—mentioning cases in which these have invested in the creation of libraries—then by claiming that they have widened the accessibility of higher education to those sectors that did not have such access in the past. For his part, when given an opening in the discussion, Eichholz contributed a recitation of the neoliberal mantra that the profit motive results in an organization that is "efficient in the administration of resources" ("eficiente en la administración de los recursos"). Vallejo responded by restating that the position of the students is that profit ("lucrar") should not be the *raison d'être* of any university, as it is today in all too many institutes of higher education in Chile, and by calling for a greater will on the part of the state to regulate the system and for the removal of subsidies from private institutions. Villegas and Eichholz became visibly frustrated at their failure to convincingly argue the official position, and upon viewing the program it clearly appears to be an ideological misfire, in which Vallejo went into the maw of the establishment media and beat it at its own game.

Soon after the program aired, it was posted on *YouTube*, where it remained available for several weeks, generating a long thread of user comments that overwhelmingly interpreted the interview as a classic David and Goliath triumph for Vallejo over the conservative establishment. But by late August the video had been taken down by *YouTube*, replaced with a message reading,

> "This video is no longer available due to a copyright claim by Red de Televisión Chilevisión S.A."[7]

Under the Digital Millenium Copyright Act of 1998, Google Inc., the owner of *YouTube*, has little choice but to remove content when faced with a copyright claim.[8] In theory the company could investigate the copyright claim and decide whether or not to comply, but in practice this would be prohibitively expensive. While the video itself remained accessible on the website of Chilevisión — recaptured and confined to a corporate-controlled profit-generating space where it was much more difficult to find — the thread of comments was no longer available. Such comments, the *vox populi* graffiti of the new media, could be seen as an effective mediator of mimetic desire and thus an important generator of public opinion. Since the removal of the video and comments thread coincided with surging unrest sparked by the student movement, and as of late-August several other episodes of *Tolerancia Cero* continued to be available on *YouTube*, the events create the appearance, justified or not, of a selective, politically motivated use of international copyright law to suppress local dissent.

The student protests and the threat they pose to the continued dominance of the neoliberal economic model in Chile brought about a series of events that has underlined the current dynamics, both local and international, of the old vs. new

Vallejo had appeared at the head of many 2011 protests, as shown on *Tolerancia Cero*.

media divide. Establishment media, in the form of news and interview programs on the traditional corporate television channels, have on occasion offered space to the leaders of the student movement but not without stacking the deck against them—as seen in the format of *Tolerancia Cero*, in which four media veterans acting as officially-sanctioned intellectuals of local economic power question a single, young representative of the students. Corporate television also carefully controls distribution.[9] Such control exercised over the traditional media is contrasted to the new media distributed through the Internet—video-hosting sites like *YouTube* and *Vimeo*, and blogs, both personal and those of official student organizations. These have been used very effectively by the students to publicize and generate participation in the movement. The case of Camila Vallejo's appearance on *Tolerancia Cero* and subsequent events—the unauthorized posting of the program on *YouTube* and its subsequent removal following the copyright claim by Chilevisión—is very revealing of both of these dynamics, on which some background will be useful.

Student protest in Chile as shown on *Tolerancia Cero*.

Three *Tolerancia Cero* panelists, Matías del Río, Juan Carlos Eichholz, Fernando Villegas, with Vallejo, l to r.

Del Río welcomed Vallejo to the program as Carla Vallejo, then Camila Vallejos. At this point hers was not yet a household name in Chile.

Vallejo was at the time president of the Confederation of Chilean Students.

Eichholz proposed a role-play scenario for Vallejo: "Let's pretend you are minister of education..."

Vallejo dismissed the role-playing and called for the state to comply with its role as guarantor of education.

Eichholz at times showed frustration as Vallejo calmly and eloquently presented the student demands.

Vallejo repeatedly refocused the questions to highlight the insufficiencies of the current neoliberal education model, to the undisguised frustration of Eichholz and Villegas.

Villegas was often clearly chagrined as Vallejo spoke.

The fourth panelist, Fernando Paulsen, listened calmly to Vallejo's responses.

The majority of YouTube commenters saw the program as a triumph by Vallejo over the conservative establishment position.

After a copyright claim by Chilevisión, YouTube

The investigative journalist María Olivia Monckeberg, who has researched and written about the business practices of private universities in Chile, identifies two principal problems with recent education policy.[10] First, even though many of the private universities are owned by foreign and local capital, they receive government subsidies. Part of the state's education budget, then, goes directly into the hands of investors who have no stake in the education of the Chilean population and thus only a secondary motivation to fulfill the mission of quality education called for in the Chilean constitution. Given that the constitution prohibits profit ("lucro") in the educational system, this is understandably a cause of great concern for both Monckeberg and the students.[11]

The implications of the second problem are more ideological than economic. The private universities are often owned by or closely linked to highly controversial organizations. The universities Los Andes and Finis Terrae, for example, are run respectively by Opus dei and the Legión de Cristo, and another, the Universidad Adolfo Ibáñez, has close ties to the Legión.[12] All three strongly promote a neoliberal economic agenda (while benefitting from state subsidies, thus inviting accusations of hypocrisy), and they are identified by Monckeberg as ideological training grounds for Chile's conservative elite in matters both moral and political. This alignment of interests aroused the concern of many when after the victory of the right in the elections of 2010, the Piñera government began to implement policies that would further erode the traditional universities' financial standing in favor of private universities.

By early June the student movement had begun to strengthen rapidly, and after June 5, the date of the *Tolerancia Cero* interview with Vallejo, it quickly spread to secondary schools—hundreds of which were occupied indefinitely by their students —then to the non-student general public. By late June protests in Santiago attracted nearly one hundred thousand marchers, numbers that continued to grow through the winter with each near-weekly protest.[13] While it is impossible to say what role the interview with Vallejo played in this rapid expansion, her importance as the movement's most eloquent spokesperson and symbol is unquestionable. Soon even the vice president of neighboring Bolivia, Álvaro García Linera, acknowledged the benefits of her charisma to the protests, declaring that

"we are all in love with her" ("todos estamos enamorados de ella").[14]

A month after the program aired, the student movement having further consolidated itself and spread to non-student sectors, Eichholz wrote an open letter to Vallejo on July 2 in his regular column in the establishment newspaper *El Mercurio*, entitled *¿Hacia dónde te llevan Camila?* in which he accused her of leading the protests in the "interest of certain groups or even individuals" ("intereses de ciertos grupos, o incluso personalidades"), referring specifically to "political and union leaders" ("dirigentes políticos y gremiales"), and he demonized the movement by describing it as irrational and radical. He then went on to characterize Vallejo as naïve and called on her to do whatever she could to defuse the movement.[5]

Without carte blanche access to established media, Vallejo published a response on her personal blog the next day entitled *Hacia la razón del pueblo, Eichholz*, in which she countered the accusations, traced the imposition of current education policy to the Pinochet period and the interests of today's economic elite, and again laid out the student demands that education be treated as a right, not as a commodity.[16] This open letter was immediately republished and linked to on many other websites, a viral distribution on new media that quickly reduced the advantage in "old media" visibility enjoyed by Eichholz. In addition to the use of blogs and their own websites, the student organizations have employed the video-hosting site *Vimeo*—which, unlike *YouTube*, only accepts content generated by the users themselves—where their "reformaeducacional" account includes short spots with high production values, featuring calls to protest by the leader of the student organization of each university.[17]

By late August some accounts had the protesters against the neoliberal education model numbering up to one million.

In a general sense, the events of 2011 have made evident a glaring imbalance in media access at the same time that they have clearly demonstrated the rhizomatic possibilities of new media in oppositional movements. Content generated or diffused by users include appropriation and distribution of the ideological misfires of the establishment media, consumer-grade videography showing *carabinero* brutality at protests, programmatic statements and user comments. Such material put online has allowed consumers to become media producers (or "re-producers"

in the case of the online revival of the Vallejo interview), tempering the immense advantage enjoyed by economically dominant sectors due to their access to the traditional media, and contributing an online organizational dimension to a community based on an oppositional politics that has not shied away from taking to the streets.[18] But the same events have also demonstrated the resiliency of corporate power's control over channels of production and diffusion—*YouTube*, the television and print "old" media—resulting in part from the use of current copyright law.

Since April of 2011, the protests have gradually expanded into a society-wide movement confronting stubborn entrenched economic power. The student demands are such that, if met, they would represent a decisive rollback of neoliberal economic policy in the very nation proclaimed as its model success story. The Piñera government, however, staffed entirely by neoliberal ideologues, is under enormous pressure not to cede to student demands. As a result it has insisted on maintaining the course imposed by the Pinochet regime, in spite of the devastation wrought by neoliberal economic policy on the poorer and middle sectors, which have in turn helped fuel the spirited protest movement. The role of the media has, as could be expected, been very telling of the power dynamics at play in the conflict.

Go to Notes page

Notes

1. The FECH (Federación de Estudiantes de la Universidad de Chile) is the oldest student organization in Chile and traditionally the most politically active. The Confech (Confederación de Estudiantes de Chile) is the umbrella organization of the individual student federations of each university. *Tolerancia Cero* has been running since 1999 on the Chilevisión channel. [return to page 1 of essay]

2. Del Río, 42, a journalist and host of several radio and television programs on major channels, studied at the Universidad Finis Terrae. Paulsen, 55, the "liberal" member of the panel, is also a television journalist, and has worked in the establishment media during and since the Pinochet period, and as a correspondent for *Time* and *The Wall Street Journal*. He is also a professor of journalism at the Universidad Adolfo Ibáñez. Villegas, 62, is a sociologist, writer and journalist who has also appeared on many establishment media programs. I will discuss Eichholz' particular background in the text. Official biographies are found at:
http://www.chilevision.cl/home/content/blogcategory/1318/202/.

3. For a concise account of the history of economic neoliberalism and its implementation in Chile and elsewhere, see Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Piñera, elected president in early 2010, is a billionaire businessman and previously the 100% owner of Chilevisión. After his election he sold the company to an international division of Time Warner Inc. Piñera's business practices were put under suspicion in late 2010, when a cable was released by Wikileaks in which the U.S. ambassador strongly questioned them as unethical and beyond "the line of what is strictly legal":
http://mexico.cnn.com/mundo/2010/12/28/un-cable-de-wikileaks-pone-en-entredicho-la-etica-de-sebastian-pinera.

After the high popularity ratings he enjoyed in the wake of the 2010 rescue of 33 miners trapped in a collapsed tunnel, Piñera's presidential popularity plummeted in an inverse relation to the growth of the student movement, and by September 2011 was just above twenty per cent. Vallejo's immediate reaction to what Piñera himself announced as the "gran reforma educacional" can be seen in a CNN Chile interview from November 2010:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mklRTJ1v71Y

4. For a press release with the student demands, see:
http://feuv.cl/2011/04/declaracion-confech/.

5. "Hagamos como si tú fueras ministra de educación, y tienes que anunciar una reforma al sistema de educación superior en el país. ¿Cuáles son los ejes que tú…plantearías en esa reforma?"

6. "Hay una falta de rol fiscalizador y rol garante por parte del estado…"

7. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EBMZfH0gPn4

8. For more on the functioning of copyright in the case of *YouTube*, see *YouTomb*: http://youtomb.mit.edu/. For more general concerns about the effects of the DMCA see the *Chilling Effects* website: http://www.chillingeffects.org/index.cgi.

9. The most visible student leaders have been Vallejo and the 24-year old Giorgio Jackson, the president of the Federación de Estudiantes de la Universidad Católica de Chile (FEUC) and, like Vallejo, spokesperson of the Confech.

10. See Monckeberg, María Olivia. *El negocio de las universidades en Chile*. Santiago: Debate, 2007, and an interview that can be found at: http://www.elclarin.cl/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=11385&Itemid=2729.

11. An excerpt of the section of the Chilean Constitution that regards education can be found at: http://www.right-to-education.org/country-node/320/country-constitutional.

12. The Legión de Cristo is a Catholic organization founded in Mexico by Marcial Maciel in the 1930s. It spread over Latin America by evangelizing the economic elites, and now operates worldwide. In many countries it owns and runs schools and universities, including, in Chile, the Universidad Finis Terrae. The president of the Universidad Adolfo Ibáñez, supermarket magnate Nicolás Ibáñez, is also a Legionario de Cristo. Maciel was dogged by accusations of sexual abuse of minors throughout his life, but not until 2005, at 85 years of age, was he sanctioned by the Vatican for his by-then widely known actions. In 2010 the Vatican ordered an worldwide "overhaul" of the Legión de Cristo to "purify" the order. See Wilkinson: http://articles.latimes.com/2010/may/01/world/la-fg-vatican-abuse-20100501.
The Vatican also rewrote Maciel's official epitaph, adding sections that referred to his "seriously and objectively immoral behavior" and his being "devoid of any scruples and authentic sense of religion." See Godoy: http://www.ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=51302.
On the presence of the Legión de Cristo in Chile, see Insunza, Andrea and Javier Ortega. *Legionarios de Cristo en Chile: Dios, Dinero y Poder*. Santiago: Universidad Diego Portales, 2008, and: http://www.lanacion.cl/prontus_noticias/site/artic/20060519/pags/20060519225432.html.

13. On the secondary students, or "pingüinos," and the student movement,

see:
http://www.rnw.nl/espanol/article/chile-los-ping%C3%BCinos-no-se-conforman-con-migajas

14 García Linera, in addition to serving as Bolivian vice president under Evo Morales, is a much-published sociologist. See http://latercera.com/noticia/educacion/2011/08/657-386037-9-vicepresidente-de-bolivia-elogio-movimiento-estudiantil-chileno-y-se-declaro.shtml

15. Eichholz, Juan Carlos. ¿Hacia dónde te llevan Camila?: http://blogs.elmercurio.com/cronica/2011/07/02/hacia-donde-te-llevan-camila.asp

16. Vallejo Dowling, Camila. Blog: http://camilapresidenta.blogspot.com/.
As of December 2011 this blog, where the entry had been originally posted, had been taken down. As of this writing the text may still be found at: http://blogs.cooperativa.cl/opinion/politica/20110704183104/hacia-la-razon-del-pueblo-eichholz/.

17. http://vimeo.com/reformaeducacional.

18. On September 11 Vallejo and Giorgio Jackson appeared on *Tolerancia Cero*. This time Eichholz was no longer on the panel, having reportedly left for the U.S. to work with professors from Harvard and NYU (see: http://diario.latercera.com/2011/04/30/01/contenido/cultura-entretencion/30-67555-9-juan-eichholz-deja-el-panel-de-tolerancia-cero-en-chilevision.shtml).
This interview was more rancorous than Vallejo's earlier interview, and frustration was especially evident on the part of Villegas, who repeatedly accused Vallejo and Jackson of using the sacrifice of the nation's students for personal aggrandizement: http://vimeo.com/29027006.

Made on Rails in Mexico

by John Mraz

If the viewer does not know a photograph's contextual specificity, an image like this of a "Mexican riviter fabricating a boxcar" becomes reduced to an example of a "railroad worker." Photo by Hermanos Mayo. Riviters making boxcars, Nonoalco train yard, Mexico City, 8 November 1944. Archivo General de la nación, Fondo Hermanos Mayo, Chronological Section, 1679.

The most recent offspring from the mating of historiography and technological media, video history—like all later children—has been defined essentially in relation to its older siblings. Thus, in one of the few essays which has attempted to wrestle with some of the thorny issues raised by this emerging discipline,

David Ellwood warned that video history

> "risks falling between two historiographical stools...oral history and film history."[1] [open notes in new window]

Ellwood was perhaps the first to point out the necessity of specifying the parameters of video history, a task which daily grows more important. This article hopes to make some small contribution to that endeavor. However, I must admit that I am considerably less concerned with "historiographical risks" than in trying to determine what this form of discourse about the past and present offers to historians, and in asking how we might go about wrestling it from the monopoly maintained by both commercial and State television producers — with their mercenary and officialist ends.

I doubt that I will have to spend much time or energy to convince readers that the "TV history" which dominates television screens is much more interested in ideological control and technical perfection than it is in conveying a real sense of the past, particularly that of the working class and, above all, that of the working class in the "backyard" of the United States. Technical perfection is neither neutral nor cheap; it is very expensive, and the costs are not only in money. Through such perfection, historians are intimidated from producing their own video histories.

Thus the field is left to those who know little of history, but are most informed as to how to obtain the enormous sums necessary to produce such "histories." Obviously, the history they propagate serves the interests of the ruling elites who make that money available. Historians' reviews of the major networks' lavishly produced "TV histories" abound with criticisms of their anachronism, inaccuracies, and triviality — faults palpably evident in the most important Mexican example, the officialist *Biografía de poder* ("Biography of Power"), shown extensively during 1987. However, although I know that such cursing of the darkness has it uses, I would prefer to call upon historians to light their own candles and begin using this sensuous, convincing, and entertaining medium to communicate the knowledge and understanding they have developed through their years of studying and teaching this discipline.

Video history and oral history

Oral history now has enough of a tradition to have begun to define its disciplinary limits, and the use of videotape equipment in conducting interviews has apparently "engendered a great deal of controversy."[2] Evidently, much of this controversy has ranged around the manner in which the presence of videotape equipment "disrupts" the sensitive interpersonal context of an interview. While not wishing to minimize the effects of equipment presence, two observations of this criticism seem to be in order.

One: To assume such purity is to lose sight of the fact that every form of "rescuing" the past will have both limitations and advantages. Although video historians need to learn from the theoretical groundwork and methodological experiences of oral historians, the particular restraints imposed by recording and recounting the past with videotape will shape that historical discourse in specific ways. For example, it has been argued by some documentary filmmakers that the very presence of equipment and personnel necessary to film an interview can act as a "catalyst," what Jean Rouch described as a "psychoanalytic stimulant," that leads informants to take the situation more seriously and incites them to greater clarity and honesty — they become more, not less, of who they are.[3]

Two: The concern of oral historians with the phenomenological aspects of the interview situation may have limited their perspective of the ways interviews can he used to communicate about the past. It could he argued that they have tended to focus on the interview process, whereas the video historian is perhaps more concerned with editing those interviews into a history.

That is not to say, obviously, that video historians are unconcerned with the interview context. What goes on during the conducting of interviews is of great importance to the finished product, and I believe that "rapport" — that delicate, if difficult to describe, relation between interviewer and informant — is probably the primary mediation of video history's aesthetic. Poor rapport results not simply in a lack of information, it turns informants into wooden figures whose stiffness interferes with the audience's ability to learn from the history they are recounting. Oral historians commonly utilize their material in transcript form, a fact which saves them from the doubly-toilsome task which video historians have in fomenting the necessary rapport for interviews.

Hechos sobre los rieles / Made on the Rails

In a country such as Mexico, personal and family relations are indispensable in establishing rapport. During the making of *Hechos sobre los rieles: Una historia de los ferrocarrileros mexicanos*, the close personal relations which the interviewer, Gloria Tirado, had maintained with several key figures in the history of the rairoad union — for example, Guillermo Treviño, Valentín Campa, Elías Terán, Juan B. Gutiérrez, and Miguel Aroche Parra — were as crucial in establishing rapport as were her family connections in the railroad town of Oriental.[4] These affinities were the key which allowed these individuals to open up in front of the camera: recounting anecdotes, telling jokes, openly criticizing the railroad union, and talking in great detail about the events which they have lived and know so well. These relationships also provided access to private photographic collections, as various informants allowed us to copy their photos and provided us with important information on these images, which were an integral visual element of the tape's aesthetic.

There was, as well, a political element in establishing rapport with the informants. With some exceptions, most of the national and local leaders interviewed were members of the Mexican Communist Party, a decision based on our desire to tell a very different story than is available in official histories, whether written or in the mass media. The fact that we came from the University of Puebla, an institution known for its leftist orientation, was important in allowing them to open up to us: they trusted us, and believed that the final tape would not betray that trust.

Here, it is useful to consider the texture offered by the variations between the interviews with those leaders and the rank-and-file workers we interviewed in the railroad town of Oriental. On the one hand, our intention was to develop a relation between the national history of the railroad workers and the micro-history of Oriental. On the other hand, it seemed to us important that the history we recounted was told not only through the mouths of the leaders, but from the perspective of the workers as well. One should not lose sight of the fact that several of those leaders came up through the rank-and-file, rising in the union through their militancy: for example, Campa and Treviño.

Nonetheless, there were significant differences between the perspective of the leaders and that of the Oriental workers. Perhaps the principle utility of the worker interviews was more that of revealing their "collective unconscious" rather than contributing to a specifically historical analysis. For example, although one of our intentions in the videotape was to demystify to some extent the exaggerated role assigned to Demetrio Vallejo in the strikes of 1958-59 (and the critiques leveled by Terán and Aroche Parra were of some use in this issue) the tendency of the workers to refer constantly to the "Vallejista Movement" reinforced the idea that those strikes were the work of one man. However, conscious of the importance of presenting what we might call a "popular historiography,"[5] and aware that an interview is a delicate relation, we chose not to contradict our informants and risk alienating them with questions that were not going to take us very far at any rate.

Video history and historical films

Such observations make us aware of the fact that video historians wear two hats. As oral historians, they have to be aware of the interview context, while as film historians they must focus on the medium as a communication tool. Nonetheless, I feel we should be careful not to be overly impressed with the apparent similarity of these two media. Film has much more visual resolution than video; in film, the image can "carry" the sound. With video, it is the opposite: sound is often of greater importance than the visual elements. It follows from this that video history is at least as closely allied with oral history as it is with film history, a position supported by the advantages which video offers when compared to film in conducting interviews. The great cost of doing interviews on film necessarily imposes limits. With video, interviewers can allow the interview to continue as long as they want, and they can conduct many more interviews.

Thus, it seems to me that, while film history will generally tend — and has in fact tended — toward the use of omniscient narration, it is the nature of video history to construct the historical narrative from interviews. Here, I would like to be as clear as possible about some of the implications of the differences between using omniscient narration and interviews (or participant narration). Although a narrative forged exclusively from interviews — as in cinema verité (the very name itself points to the danger) — may appear to be more objective, it is not. In fact, the very credibility which the interviews lend to the videotape may tend to interfere with the critical perspective which every good work of history ought to awaken in its audience. A narrative constructed from interviews may make it difficult to get beyond or behind the vision of those being interviewed. Thus, it

becomes the task of the video historian to create a context which will distinguish between memory and history (a problem we will return to below).

It is also important to draw attention to the structural limitations that one confronts in attempting to construct a history through interviews. The director of the BBC series "The World at War," Jerry Kuehl observed that there is a tendency among informants

> "to replace a candid, private version of events, with a sorter public version."[6]

For Kuehl, while interviews can appear to he very intimate, those which go into historical documentaries often make for a very formal and very public kind of history that is a good deal more circumspect. We like to believe that the rapport that we were able to establish with our informants in making Hechos saved us, to a large degree, from the generalized self-censorship that preoccupies Kuehl.[7] However, there was surely more than one occasion on which the fact that our informants were appearing before a camera conditioned their responses.

Another constraint in this discipline come from the sort of expectations that we have about what is a good screen presence; that is, the degree to which what we believe to be "good television" determines who we allow to tell the history. This issue of presence revolves around various considerations: For example, does the informant talk too fast or too slow? Do they speak clearly or are they difficult to understand. Is their's a popular or an academic language. Do you hear the "dental click" characteristic of many older informants? Do they move too much or do they appear to have no energy? Such questions make us aware of the fact that many times the people that appear on the screen to recount historical events are there, not because their interpretation is the best, but because their's is a TV presence to which we hay become accustomed. Finally, we must not forget the all-too-familiar phenomenon of informants who tell wonderful stories — passionate and colorful and full of anecdotes that illuminate the past and bring it to life — until the moment when we turn on the lights to begin taping them. Then, the faces become pallid and the histories monosyllabic. Obviously, they have been terrorized by the equipment, and cannot appear in the tape. Nonetheless, if it is necessary to be conscious of these structural limitations, it is important to remember that these are among the limits that define the discipline of video history.

Further, if the use of interviews and a cinema verité narrative do not necessarily assure greater objectivity, they do allow viewers to see and hear actual participants, and they may provide more historical detail: for example, information about the informants' sex, age, race, and class (something that can be gleaned from their clothing, as well as from their forms of speech.)[8] Moreover, interviews can provide access to elements absent from written sources, such as body language and voice intonation, volume, and rhythm.

Housing was a central demand of the 1958 strikes. For that reason, communist militant and railroad worker, Guillermo Treviño documented the poor conditions in which railroad families lived. Photo: Guillermo Treviño. Old train cars that serve as housing for railroad workers and their families, Puebla, 1958. Archive of Guillermo Treviño, Instituto de Ciencias Sociales-Universidad Autónoma de Puebla.

These may tell us more about meaning than about facts.[9] For example, Miguel Aroche Parra provides a trenchant description of the significance attached to the greatest setback in the history of Mexican labor when he states,

> "The railroaders' defeat in 1959 was a defeat for the labor movement, a defeat for the democratic movement, a defeat for the anti-imperialist movement, a defeat for the peace movement. That is the magnitude of the 1959 defeat."

Whether one agrees with Aroche Parra's hyperbole, it is indicative of the psychological impact of that event on its participants, something reinforced by the emotional charge evident in his vehement tone and passionate gestures.

Aroche Parra's use of significant pauses, the lowering and raising of his voice, and his kinetic body motion — one hand cutting knife-like into the other as he recounts how U.S. President Eisenhower ordered his Mexican counterpart, Lopez Mateos, to "strike against the labor movement" — are an articulate demonstration of the feelings still moved by those memories. His intonation and movements are also a revealing embodiment of an expressive style typical of Mexican labor militants. Hence his physical presence conveys an element at once important to understanding the history of the Mexican railroad workers and impossible to convey except through the medium of a video (or film) interview.

Yet another instance during the filming of *Hechos* where an informant's reaction provided an interesting insight into Mexican culture occured during the interview with Guillermo Treviño. When I asked Treviño why the 1959 repression had been so brutal, I did so knowing that it he was going to he made uncomfortable by having to respond to me, a gringo, that it had been a result of Eisenhower's pressure on López Mateos. And, that is what happened: he said,

"Although I'd prefer not to have to say it, I think that the U.S. had a lot

to do with what happened."

As a Mexican caballero of the old school, Treviño did not want to insult his "guest." But, as a tireless defender of social justice, he had to answer with what he thought was the truth. Here, the interview context served as a catalyst, provoking a behavior very typical of elder Mexican men.

Utilizing the interview as the narrative structure of a video history does not, however, assign to it a value such that the historian ought to fear "interrupting" the "flow of memory," as Ellwood noted some "extreme defenders" of oral history do.[10] In all forms of history, materials are selected by the historian in accordance with what he or she perceives as the truth to be conveyed. But, some oral historians have argued against the use of the "TV history" form in which "cutaways" to moving footage or photographs are usual. Here, the distinction between the "stereotypical" and the "particular" is of utmost importance. Producers of "TV history" are little concerned with communicating the particularity — i.e., the historical — of the specific event and period presented. They conduct a minimum of graphic research, and the result is the use of photos and moving footage time and again to illustrate some thesis, with little respect for the real context out of which these historical artifacts have been ripped.

Stereotypes and peculiarity

This tendency to use images stereotypically not only undercuts the credibility and excitement they can bring to the work it flies in the face of these artifacts' particularity. Although we are accustomed to seeing photos used as illustrations to represent generalities in TV productions and textbooks, they would be better used to present particularities. As opposed to words — conventional symbols that describe similarities — a photo can never be general. It always presents a specific moment, a particular fraction of a second. The forms of material existence and social relations which are revealed by photos — daily life, work, class, race, and gender relations — are never general. A photo can never represent, for example, "labor relations in the 1960s." A photo is not a synthesis, it is simply a slice of time in which this worker stood in front of this specific machine at this particular instant; a fraction of a second in which this group gathered in front of this factory to make these demands.

However, historical photographs suffer from a curious irony. If they are by nature necessarily particular, seen out of context, they become generalities. Without some way of reconstructing the specific situation presented in a photo, the riveter fabricating boxcars in the Nonoalco trainyard on the 8th of November, 1944, becomes railroad worker. (click to see image) Stripped of their contextual specificity, photographs become metaphors or symbols, myth instead of history. We need to bring the same sort of seriousness and discipline that we use in researching written documents to the search for and identification of photographs and moving footage.[11] [open endnotes in new window]

The degree to which even historians who work extensively with film assume that images have been used in a general, abstract, and illustrative way can he demonstrated in the following anecdote. When *Hechos Sobre Los Rieles* was shown at the 1987 Congress of the American Historical Association, the prominent historian-cineaste, John O'Connor (founder and editor of *Film & History*) was surprised to discover that, with few possible exceptions, the photos utilized in the tape all corresponded to the historical period presented. He found the fact so remarkable that he stated some way ought to be found to inform the audience of this.

I would also like to argue for a greater us of photos in place of the traditional reliance on moving footage that we find in so much film history. This proposition is based on several observations. The first is a question: What information is available in moving footage that is not present in photos? Though recognizing that there are certain elements in documentary footage that are less accessible in photos — body language, for example — the reliance on footage fills up screen time at an alarming rate. This reduces the variety of images that could be used. It's a situation made worse by the fact that the limited amount of footage

available necessitates its "stereotypical" utilization in different productions.

Second, as graphic history goes beyond mere "illustrationism" — moving from representation to presentation — photographs offer greater possibilities for bringing the audience into an interpretive tension with the work.[12] Instead of being led along by the nose through a constant alternation of the moving image, the audience has the opportunity to view the photos and to reflect on them as well as on the interpretation which is being offered. (Of course, the aesthetic demands of video and history may be at odds, and what could appear to a video maker as an appropriate time for an image to be on screen might seem to an historian completely inadequate. However, this is the sort of tension that will be resolved as historians begin to develop their own language of video.)

Third, the working class has made many, many more images of itself in photographs than on film; these photos are fundamental in trying to tell as truthful a story about them as we can. Fourth, photos require a different sort of research than film, one which often brings historians into direct, continual contact with the people whose photos they are reproducing. As we copy and identify the photographs, we hear history told from the mouth of those who have lived and made it.

These considerations bring the triangulated relationship of the historian with the sources and the audience into focus. As is the case with the use of interviews, we understand and acknowledge our role as a prism between those who have lived history and those who are hearing and seeing it recounted. Finally, it is a good deal cheaper to copy photos than to reproduce film, a primary concern for historians who wish to use modern media.

Researching photographs

For the above-mentioned reasons, we made extensive use of photographs in "Hechos sobre los rieles;" and some of the methodological issues raised raised during that project may be of interest. In the first place, it is crucial to point out that historians who labor in photographic archives engage in essentially the same tasks as historians who work with written sources: finding, preserving, and utilizing documents to talk about the past. In general, this is a different situation than that of historians who employ television and film footage, something that can be appreciated in considering Pierre Sorlin's intelligent comments on the historian's role in relation to such footage. He stated that,

> "audiovisual material[s]...completely alter the situation. [H]istorians have no monopoly over the material, nor are they alone in studying and disseminating it. For example, television has made most of the interesting material relating to the Second World War widely available. In this respect, the historian's task is no longer to compile otherwise unknown sources and make them available to all: he must learn instead to use material that is already widely available."[13]

While Sorlin's argument in relation to television and film footage is essentially true (although we would want to consider the possible uses of home movie footage), this is decidedly not the case with photographs, and above all in a

country such as Mexico. Extensive research is required in both public and private photo archives in order to unearth and identify images useful to the history which will be recounted. Further, the purchase and preservation of private archives by the Mexican government is often the direct result of historians' research and lobbying.

The degree of photographic research necessary to produce a video-history can be appreciated in considering the variety of archives consulted in making "Hechos sobre los rieles." Among the principle repositories of the photographs used in the videotape were major public archives composed largely from the collections of photojournalists. The source most important for the period from the Mexican revolution (1910-1917) to 1940 was the well-known archive of Agustín Víctor Casasola which is housed in the Fototeca of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia.[14] However, while the Casasola collection provided us with some lovely and powerful images, the fact that the archive is rather loosely catalogued placed us in a dilemma, above all given our position concerning the particularity of photographs. Of course, the photographs of the revolution were clearly recognizable; but, as we could not rely on the identifications of Casasola photos for the following periods, we were forced to utilize images from other sources for most of the succeeding "chapters".

Nonetheless, we faced a problem in the "chapter" on the Workers' Administration (1938-1940). We did have some photos from the private archive of Elías Terán, the first Director of the Administration; but we didn't have nearly enough to make the interview with Juan B. Gutiérrez visually palatable. Gutiérrez's statements were crucial to the tape and hitherto unknown to students of Mexican railroad history; but, his monotonal intonation and his refusal to look up at the camera or interviewer would have quickly alienated our audience. We found ourselves facing what we might call the "aesthetic imperative" of graphic history.

The way out of our dilemma was to locate photos in the Casasola archive that almost certainly had been taken in the late 1930s and which we felt expressed the energy and optimism of Workers' Administration experiment. ([click to see image](#)) One historian who has worked extensively with photographs, Michael Lesy, argued that,

> "If photographs are to be used as data by the humane social sciences, they must be understood as documents of a particular era and its particular state of mind."[15]

Our aesthetic requirements seemed to justify this recourse to what we might call a "psychological correspondence." However, we remain convinced of the necessity to struggle against the "easy way out" of "illustrationism" that has given visual history the bad reputation it has so often richly deserved. Photos must be contextualized, and we continue to be committed to making every effort to find images that correspond exactly to the period depicted. In the case of the Workers' Administration, however, we were compelled, in the words of J.H. Hexter, to "sacrifice exactness for evocative force."[16]

Fortunately, the other public photo archives we utilized did not present us with this problem. Though probably the largest collection of negatives by a photojournalist collective in Latin America, the Fondo Hermanos Mayo of the

Archivo General de la Nación has a catalogue for many of its images, providing data about specific dates and places.[17] Thus, for example, a number of the photos we chose of the 1958 railroad strike are found in the "Chronological" section of the archive, in envelope # 12609, on which is described the events occuring and the places where the images were taken on the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th of July. ([click to see image)](#) The Archivo General de la Nación also provided photos for the "chapter" on the Adolfo de la Huerta rebellion; these were readily identifiable as they were found in the Fondo Presidente Plutarco Elías Calles and clearly corresponded to that event. Other public archives included the Hemeroteca Nacional (National Periodical Library), where the newspapers photographed contain exact dates, and the collection of the Mexican Railroad Union (Sindicato de Trabajadores Ferrocarrileros de la República Mexicana), whose photos are accompanied by typed descriptions of dates, places and people. Finally, the few images we utilized from the Centro de Estudios de Historia de Mexico (CONDUMEX) were easily identifiable as pertaining to the revolutionary period which is the focus of that archive.

Private photographic archives were as vital to the video history as were the public depositories. As noted above, Elías Terán's collection provided us with several images of the Workers' Administration, and of his campaign for Secretary-General of the Railroad Union; our consultations with him made clear the contents of the images. However, the single most important private archive was that of Guillermo Treviño, for we were able to trace his career as a railroad worker and union militant through the extensive collection which began shortly after the revolution and continued up to 1987. Further, the lengthy interviews we conducted with him provided us with much information, as well as a general orientation in Mexican railroad history. These photos and interviews were particularly significant because, as a resident of Puebla (a city two hours from Mexico City), Treviño afforded us a perspective from the provinces so often lacking in histories of Mexico.

Another effective counterbalance to the dominance of Mexico City in Mexican historiography was supplied by the images of Oriental. By conducting an almost door-to-door search, we were able to turn up images that were crucial for telling the town's political history — such as its founding in 1917 — as well as being socially revealing, for example, photos of young boys posed on the fronts of trains during one sequence where informants describe how every male family member works for the railroad. Further, the use of family photo albums in Oriental was a critical element in addressing the imbalance present in the dominant form of History which focuses on great men and events; to observe that a "people's history" of Oriental could only have been told through such family images is to belabor the obvious.[18]

Hecho sobre los rieles' interviewer, Gloria Tirado, had family in Oriental. People there freely offered the filmmakers anecdotes and details about events they lived through. Photo: Couple in patio of train station, Oriental, Puebla, ca. 1950. Archive of John Mraz.

The role of the photos in communicating historical knowledge is worth considering. Essentially, the photographs function to enrich, enliven, and personalize the history which the informants are recounting. For example, when Valentín Campa explains that the railroad workers joined de la Huerta's rebellion because "he protected them from attacks by CROM goons, the main enemy of the labor movement," this statement is accompanied by an image of the CROM's despotic and ostentatiously corrupt leader, Luis Napoleón Morones, seated beneath the CROM banner and in front of a table ladden with rich foods and expensive liquors, his double chin oozing over his white collar.[19]

Photos can also render less polemical testimony. The very title of the tape, "Hechos sobre los rieles," comes from Treviño's statement that the Mexican revolution was "made on the rails," something apparent in photos of families housed on top of troop trains. (click to see image) Such images of the revolution also attest to the participation of women in that struggle, something generally more apparent in photos than in written accounts. We can see this same presence in one of the photos from Treviño's archive, where the banner of the Unión de Conductores, Maquinistas, Garroteros y Fogoneros is carried by his wife, Herminia, during the 1921 strike.

If women are often voiceless in historical accounts, photos such as this let us glimpse important aspects of their presence. Photo: Guillermo Treviño. Woman washing clothes beside old train cars that serve as housing for railroad workers and their families, Puebla, 1958. Archive of Guillermo Treviño, Instituto de Ciencias Sociales-Universidad Autónoma de Puebla.

Treviño's collection also provided evidence of the poor housing conditions of the railroad workers and their families; for he himself took the images of the old railroad cars in which they lived, as well as of the woman washing clothes next to the track. (click to see image & another image) The demand for the level of housing promised by the 1917 Constitution was central to the 1958 strikes; and Valentín Campa makes clear in the tape that the expense this would have caused the multi-national corporations was one of the main factors behind the repression unleashed against the workers. Treviño's archive contained eloquent testimonies of the price paid for attempting to create an independent Mexican labor movement, as in images of him and other strikers being marched off to jail under military guard in 1959. The Hermanos Mayo photos of the army occupation of the railroad stations are also cogent and graphic proof of the Mexican government's determination to control the labor movement.[20] (click to see image) As an alternative to such repression, we utilized images of the jubilation of the railroad workers when they won the short-lived right to elect their own representatives, (click to see image) as well as photos from Terán's

private archive where, during his candidacy for Secretary-General of the union, workers painted "Vote for Terán, He Won't Sell Us Out" on a water tower.

History and the past

It is useful here to remember that history and the past are not the same thing. The tendency to equate the past and its reconstruction is particularly problematic in an audio-visual discourse where the memories of informants easily become the equivalent of history, the headlines of newspapers can be taken to be what "really happened," and the visual images can be perceived as" reality." Conscious of this problem, and desirous of producing an educational videotape, we felt that the project's goal was not just to tell a history but to produce a critical response to that which we were recounting. We attempted to do that through certain self-reflexive tactics. For example, we incorporated comments by Elías Terán in which he refers specifically to the fact that he is participating in an historical reconstruction; he is also careful to qualify his perspective, "subjectifying" his remembrances. Through these comments, he distinguishes between "memory" and "history," two forms that are often conflated in cinema verité productions where the narrative is constructed largely through interviews.

A different strategy designed to produce a critical response to the videotape was that embodied in the use — and reflection on that use — of newspaper headlines. Each "chapter" of the videotape is introduced through headlines that serve to orient the audience about the events which they are going to witness and hear about. For example, the "chapter" entitled "The Strikes of 1958-1959" is preceded by headlines and texts from newspapers of that period that provide a basic framework for following the major events of those strikes. However, in spite of the usefulness of these headlines in quickly orienting the audience as to the history they were to witness, we did not want to give the impression that what appeared in the newspapers — or in the videotape — was truth incarnate. For that reason, towards the end of the videotape we utilized a statement by Valentín Campa where he asserted that the 1958-59 strikes were smashed

> "principally by the great political confusion that was sown by all the news media in insisting that the movement was directed by the Soviet Embassy."

By juxtaposing this statement with headlines such as that decrying the "Railroaders' Plans for a 'Workers' Revolution,'" we hoped to draw attention to the subjectivity of one of the sources that we were employing to tell this history.

Now, while the strategies we employed with some of the interviews and the newspaper texts may have served a bit to remind the audience that history, to paraphrase Korzybski, is a map of the past and not the past itself, we were not able to incorporate such distanciation in our use of photographs. We feel that this is regrettable, because, as Eric Margolis has argued,

> "Photographs tend to overpower our critical faculties and our ability to question the image before us."[21]

Thus, it is perhaps the creation of a disjuncture between words and images that offers the greatest possibility for "cracking the videotape apart at the seams"

through internal contradiction, and stimulating a critical reaction to both the visual images as well as to the tape as a whole.[22] To a limited extent, we attempted to do this by juxtaposing photos of happy couples embracing in the Oriental train yard at the same time that an informant describes the complete lack of social life in that town. Of course, this juxtaposition also showed the plurality of perspectives on small town life, for the fact that those couples had such images taken provides insight into their feelings about the railroad — what they "were proud of, thought interesting, and what they wanted to show to others."[23] In general, however, we were not able to go much beyond "illustrationism." If the photographs do enrich the history, they still remain essentially picturizations of the events presented rather than function to incite the public to take on a critical stance and question both the images and the history which is being recounted.

A methodological problem

Having noted the utility of photographs, as well as our limitations in employing them, it is necessary to draw attention to problems created in the use of "cutaways" during interviews. In what we might call the "classical" form of TV interviews, ellipses were covered up with cutaways. It was felt that to cut within the interview was unaesthetic, because it resulted in the informant's head suddenly jerking from one position to another. This seems to have changed recently, and we now often see cuts within the interview visually presented by the "jerking head," or with "wipes." While I applaud television networks for this apparent move toward objectivity — though suspicious that it only functions to disarm the audience and make the noxious ideology they serve up more credible — we chose not to follow this trend, and decided to cover ellipses within the interviews with cutaways. This of course poses the question of whether every cutaway is an ellipsis. Though we are cognizant of the methodological problems this creates — and aware once again of the way that aesthetic demands shape video history — we were nonetheless willing to sacrifice the apparent objectivity of the "jerking head" for the power and grace that were available in as seamless a web as we could construct on a most limited budget,[24] where members of the Mexican working class recount their experiences.

Video and labor history

The implications of using videotape to record and recount working-class history are complex. On the one hand, it would seem to be the most appropriate medium for this discipline. It gives a voice and image to the "inarticulate" allowing for the incorporation of their photos — whether from private collections or as the work of photojournalists, who earn their daily bread by recording history in the making — and it facilitates the use of music related to that class. These arguments are particularly convincing when we discuss the working-class history of an underdeveloped country such as Mexico, where illiteracy is high and most workers are far from being able to write of their experiences (although one notable exception in the tape is Valentín Campa).[25] However, video history is expensive; it requires training and experience which few workers have the time or money to receive so that they might develop their own forms of talking about their past in this medium. Nonetheless, experiments in revolutionary situations,

such as Nicaragua under the Sandinistas, indicate that it may be easier for workers to learn basic videotape production skills than it would be for them to acquire the capacity to write their own history.[26] We may, then, be not so terribly far from that day when, as Eric Hobsbawm told us,

> "working people can make their own life and their own history."[27]

In sum, the battle is joined: videotape histories will be produced, whether historians do so or not. To some historians, certainly, it will seem a weak medium for conveying the complexities of history; but I would remind them that it is not a question of "translating" a written text into a visual discourse, but of exploring the new ways of talking about the past which this medium makes available. And, I would argue that there is a sensual expansion obtained through seeing and hearing actual participants talk of their experiences, through looking at photos and footage of events, and through listening to music from the period which provides a stimulation as much intellectual as emotive and aesthetic. We witness the living proof of history, a proof which — if it does not provide as many answers — pricks the mind to ask the questions.

Go to Notes page

Notes

1. David W. Ellwood, "Archivo Nazionale Cinematografico Della Resistenza, Torino — Oral History and Film History: the Use and Misuse of Interviews," in *History and Film: Methodology, Research, Education*, edited by K.R.M. Short and Karsten Fledelius, (Copenhagen: International Association for Audiovisual Media in Historical Research and Education, 1980), 21-32. [return to page 1]

2. Joel Gardner, "Oral History and Video in Theory and Practice," *Oral History Review* 12 (1984), 105.

3. See Erik Barnouw, *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 253-262; and the interview with Jean Rouch in *Documentary Explorations,* edited by G. Roy Levin (Garden City: Doubleday, 1971), 137.

4. *Hechos Sobre Los Rieles: Una Historia De Los Ferrocarrileros Mexicanos* is the result of a collaboration between Gloria Tirado and John Mraz from 1984 to 1987. In 1988, it was subtitled in English as *Made On Rails: A History Of Mexican Railroad Workers*. In 1988, the videotape was given the "Award of Merit in Film" by the Latin American Studies Association and the Hubert B. Herring Award" as the "Best Videotape, Film, or Non-Print Media" by the Pacific Coast Council for Latin American Studies, It is distributed in the United States by The Cinema Guild (1697 Broadway, New York, NY, 10019) and, in Mexico, by the Centro de Información by Documentación de la Cultura Audio Visual (CIDCA V) of the Universidad Autónoma de Puebla.

5. See Michael Frisch, 'The Memory of History," in *Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public*, ed. Susan Porter Benson, et al. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986). 5-17.

6. Jerry Kuehl. "TV. History," *History Workshop* 1 (Spring, 1976), 129.

7. Ibid., p. 130.

8. See Lola G. Luna, "El video aplicado a la memoria de la mujeres latinoamericanas, *Boletín Americanista* 38 (Barcelona, 1988).

9. See Alessandro Portelli, "The Peculiarities of Oral History," *History Workshop Journal* 12 (Autumn, 1981).

10. Ellwood, op. cit., p. 31.

11. I have argued this point in the following articles:" Más allá dc la decoración: hacia una historia gráfica de las mujeres en Mexico," *Politica y cultura* 1 (Fall 1992); "Imágenes ferrocarrileras: una visión poblana," *Lecturas Históricas de Pueblo* 59 (Puebla: Gobierno del Estado de Puebla, 1991); "Some Visual Notes Toward a Graphic History of the Mexican Working Class," *Journal of the West* 27:4 (October, 1988); "De la fotografía histórica: particularidad y nostalgia," *Nexos* 91 (July 1985). [return to page 2]

12. See John Berger, "Another Way of Telling," *Journal of Social Reconstruction* 1:1 (January-March, 1980), 60.

13. Pierre Sorlin, *The Film in History: Restaging the Past* (Totowa, New Jersey: Barnes & Noble, 1980), 4.

14. The Casasola collection is composed of some 400,000 glass plate and plastic negatives. The best published introductions to this archive are:Pablo Ortiz Monasterio, ed., *Mexico: The Revolution and Beyond: Photographs by Agustín Víctor Casasola 1900-1940* (New York: Aperture, 2003); and Flora Lara Klahr, *Jefes, héroes y caudillos: Archive Casasola* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1986).

15. Michael Losy, "The Photography of History," *Afterimage* 2:8 (February, 1975), 3.

16. J.H. Hexter, "The Rhetoric of History," *Doing History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971), p. 19.

17. The Fondo Hermanos Mayo contains some five million negatives. See John Mraz, "CloseUp: An Interview with the Hermanos Mayo, Spanish-Mexican Photojournalists (1930s-present)" *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture* 11 (1992); and John Mraz, "Foto Hermanos Mayo: A Mexican Collective," *History of Photography* 17:1 (Spring, 1993).

18. On the use of family albums, see David Russell, "Any Old Albums? Building a people's history," *Camerawork* 16.

19. CROM are the initials of the Confederación Regional Obrera Mexicana (Regional Confederation of Mexican Workers), the first national union in that country.

20. An interesting experience illustrating the importance of the ideological control of images is that which occurred while I was mounting a photographic exposition on "The History of the Mexican Labor Movement" for the Centro de Estudios Históricos del Movimiento Obrero Mexicano (CEHSMO), a research center affiliated with the Secretaría de Trabajo (Department of Labor). I had only recently arrived to live in Mexico, and had selected several of the more powerful photos by the Hermanos Mayo of the army intervention in the 1959 strike. However, I was quickly informed that under no circumstances could images showing the military occupation of the railroads be included in the exhibit.

21. Eric Margolis, "Mining Photographs: Unearthing the Meanings of

Historical Photos," *Radical History Review* 40 (Jan. 1988), 35.

22. I am here paraphrasing from the famous discussion of Young Mr. Lincoln that occurred in the *Cahiers du Cinéma*. See Jean-Luc Comolli and Jean Narboni, "Cinéma / Ideology/ Criticism," in *Movies and Methods* 1, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California, 1976), 27.

23. See Marie Czech, "At Home: reconstructing everyday life through photographs and artifacts," *Afterimage* 5:3 (Sept. 1977), 11.

24. Given the gratuitous access provided by the Puebla State TV station (IMEVISION-PUEBLA) for editing the final version, the cost of the videotape is difficult to calculate; the total amount spent was somewhere around $2,000 to $3,000 dollars. We were only able to rent recording equipment for two days and to tape a total of seven hours of interviews. Other very minimal expenditures include the price of the photos, the slide film on which to copy them, and the costs of musicalization.

25. See Campa's autobiography, *Mi testimonio: memorias de un communista mexicana* (Mexico: Ediciones de Cultura Popular, 1978).

26. See Alfonso Gumucio Dagrón, "Nicaragua: cine obrero sandinista," *Cuadernos de comunicación alternativa* 1 (May, 1983); and the interview with him in *Cinema and Social Change: Conversations with Filmmakers,* ed. Julianne Burton, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986).

27. Eric Howsbawm, "Labor History and Ideology," *Workers: Worlds of Labour* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 14.

Photo identification

1. Hermanos Mayo; Riviters making boxcars, Nonoalco train yard, Mexico City, 8 November 1944. Archivo General de la nación, Fondo Hermanos Mayo, Chronological Section, 1679.

2. Riviters, Mexico, ca. 1930. Fondo Casasola, SINAFO-Fototeca Nacional del INAH.

3. Women on top of railroad cars, Mexico, ca. 1915. Inv. 643154, Fondo Casasola, SINAFO-Fototeca Nacional del INAH.

4. Guillermo Treviño; Old train cars that serve as housing for railroad workers and their families, Puebla, 1958. Archive of Guillermo Treviño, Instituto de Ciencias Sociales-Universidad Autónoma de Puebla.

5. Hermanos Mayo; Soldier and striking railroad worker, Nonoalco train yard, Mexico City, 6 August 1958. Archivo General de la Nación, Fondo Hermanos Mayo, Chronological Section, 12636.

6. Hermanos Mayo; Striking railroad workers, Nonoalco train yard, Mexico City, 2-4 July 1958. Archivo General de la Nación, Fondo Hermanos Mayo, Chronological Section, 12609.

7. Hermanos Mayo; Striking railroad workers celebrate their (short-lived) victory, Nonoalco train yard, Mexico City, 25 February 1959. Archivo General de la Nación, Fondo Hermanos Mayo, Chronological Section, 13313.

8. Couple in patio of train station, Oriental, Puebla, ca. 1950. Archive of John Mraz.

9. Guillermo Treviño; Woman washing clothes beside old train cars that serve as housing for railroad workers and their families, Puebla, 1958. Archive of Guillermo Treviño, Instituto de Ciencias Sociales-Universidad Autónoma de Puebla.

In *Reina y Rey*, Julio García Espinosa pays homage to Vittorio De Sica's *Umberto D.* Consuelo Vidal plays Reina, an old woman who lives alone with her dog, Rey, in Havana during the 1990s.

García Espinosa employs a neorealist aesthetic during the first half of the film, as Reina and Rey wander the streets of Havana.

Julio García Espinosa's *Reina y Rey*: from returning exile to Cuban-American tourist

by Mariana Johnson

In revolutionary Cuba, the "returning exile," has long been a figure associated with political and emotional regression. Governmental discourse imagined the exile's backward-looking gaze, debilitating politics and chauvinistic sense of entitlement as impediments to the progress of the nation-state. But this depiction mainly dominated before the fall of Cuba's socialist trading partners. With the collapse of the Soviet bloc, the Cuban economy began a period of rapid economic collapse, which Fidel Castro in 1990 named "the Special Period in Times of Peace." From 1989 to 1992, the country's gross national product declined by thirty percent, and the Cuban government passed a series of measures mandating sacrifice and bracing for further shortages.

Among the many changes that occurred as a result of that economic freefall was an official retooling of discourse on the exile-national relationship. Transnational remittances made émigrés a more important part of the economy than ever before, and in 1993 Castro legalized the use of U.S. dollars. As one contemporary Cuban saying goes, "You have to have *fe*," which, playing on the expression "you have to have faith," jokes that you also need *familiares en el exterior*, or family living abroad. *Gusanos* (worms), the derogatory term once applied to Cubans who left the country, became *gusanos verdes* (green worms), and their enhanced importance in sustaining the island influenced the processes of their (limited) reincorporation and reconciliation. In the context of Cuban film, these changes affected the representational space that exiles had been afforded on screen.

The official acceptance of those who, at the Mariel exodus in 1980, were called "*escoria*" (scum) and betrayers of their nation is one of the many paradoxes of Cuba during the nineties (Castro). So how has a culture—and specifically, the state-sponsored Instituto Cubano de Arte e Industria Cinematográfica (ICAIC)—come to terms with this paradox? During the Special Period, several filmmakers have reconfigured and re-presented the returning exile, which has since

The mise-en-scène of Cuba during the Special Period: black-market salesmen, prostitution, bicycles and material shortages.

contributed to the representation of the Cuban American tourist as a new social figure. Perhaps the most significant film in this respect is Julio García Espinosa's *Reina y Rey* (*Queen and King*, 1994), in part because through its narrative one can actually follow the shift in perception by which the figure of the returning exile is replaced with that of the Cuban American tourist.

García Espinosa made *Reina y Rey* at a time when home-grown film production was at a near standstill. The economic crisis produced a scenario in which almost no funds existed to support filmmaking, so the government began to require self-financing in the culture industries. This meant that it was nearly impossible to make movies without external financing. Filmmakers had to reformulate the meanings of revolutionary cinema as they negotiated economic restructuring and the forces of globalization simultaneously. Critics inside the island and out were lamenting that ICAIC had become a mere "shadow of its former self." Cuban film scholar Juan Antonio García Borrero wrote that filmmaking had been transformed from "collective poetry" into an "invertebrate set of isolated poetries of filmmakers, stubborn in making their cinema but not *the* cinema" (his emphasis). To talk about Cuban cinema in the nineties carries the risk of "talking about something that hardly exists" (173).

It is perhaps due to this perception that *Reina y Rey* has received only scant attention in film scholarship. "*The*" cinema for García Borrero, as for many others, is one dedicated to the rigorous exploration of revolutionary ideals and aesthetics, with the aim of shaping socially engaged publics; it is "collective poetry." *Reina y Rey* does not appear to have much in common with the avant-gardist, Third Worldist films that made Cuban cinema internationally renowned. Nor it is a critique of the Cuban government (the other means by which Cuban films can sometimes gain international recognition). *Reina y Rey* is a film that deals with very specific, domestic issues—namely, economic restructuring and the return of exiles—while presenting a fairly conventional tale of an old woman's loyalty, the kind of story that might appeal to a foreign audience. But this kind of strategic "double voice" is not an anomaly in Cuban cinema. And while it may be tempting to mourn the loss of "*the*" cinema, I am here concerned with Cuban cinema as it is practiced, and has been for some time—namely in dialogue with the market and economic globalization.

Reina y Rey involves the story of an old woman, Reina (Consuelo Vidal), who lives alone with her little dog, Rey. Unable to feed him, Reina tries to leave him at the pound, but at the last minute changes her mind. Meanwhile the dog escapes, and Reina is left searching. During these early sequences, García Espinosa presents a mise en scene of life in the Special Period, focusing on the scraps, vacant industrial spaces, and meandering bodies that float in and out of public spaces.

The first half of the film is shot in black-and-white, uses on-location

Reina struggles to feed her dog.

She eventually decides to leave Rey at the pound, but the dog escapes.

After an electricity blackout, Reina falls asleep and then awakes to a loud knocking on the door. The film changes from black-and-white to color photography.

shooting, and follows the quiet microactions of Reina as she searches for food in an economically depressed Havana. García Espinosa, like his esteemed colleague Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, studied at the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia in Rome early in his career during the 1950s, and with *Reina y Rey* he clearly pays homage to Vittorio De Sica's *Umberto D* (1952), transposing the story of an old pensioner and his dog in postwar Italy onto that of an old widow and her dog in Cuba during the Special Period. The film is dedicated to Cesare Zavattini, the neorealist proponent who wrote *Umberto D*.

There is a special tension to the nonrealistic look and storyline, however, because García Espinosa does situate the film so firmly in the contemporary context. The first outdoor scene, for instance, shows Reina buying food from a young, bandana-clad black market salesman, who wears an earring and backback as he rides his bicycle through the neighborhood, making his rounds. *Reina y Rey* depicts so many indices of life in the Special Period—dollars, prostitution, unemployment, tourism, an urban landscape marked by transnational travelers of all kinds — that its nostalgic aesthetic seems tongue-in-cheek. The image of the wizened Reina walking through congested leisure spaces where gaudy tourists are buying food at umbrella stands seems especially incongruous with the black-and-white cinematography and sentimental score, not to mention the performance of Consuelo Vidal, who hardly speaks a word of dialogue throughout the entire film. So, while there may be a degree of nostalgia to the neorealist influence in *Reina y Rey*, there is also a reflexive bent, which becomes more clearly pronounced forty minutes into the film, when the Miami exiles come knocking on Reina's door and the film switches from black-and-white to color photography.

Reina lives in a house formerly owned by her employers, who left for the United States twenty years prior. As their housekeeper and childcare provider, she maintained her residence in the house and is now its rightful owner, although she has done little to change it since; she even keeps her young charge's room exactly as it was when she cared for him. One morning after days spent searching for Rey, who has run away in search of food, Reina wakes to find that her former employers, Carmen and Emilio (Coralia Veloz and Rogelio Blaín), have come back without warning. At first it appears that they are simply paying a visit, but it quickly becomes clear that they intend to stay in the house and resume their patronizing relationship with Reina, friendliness shot through with a power-laden social dynamic that has them leading Reina around by the hand and speaking for her. Garcia Espinosa emphasizes the issue of exilic presumptuousness, with Carmen — in a somewhat stylized, hyperbolic performance — excitedly talking about being back in *their* home, *their* neighborhood, *their* city. She runs through the house looking at all of herold belongings. Carmen and Emilio thus enter the film fully, if somewhat stereotypically, coded as returning Miami exiles, who perform their ownership of material things and social interactions, ignoring the twenty years of history that have passed since they left.

Theories about exilic identity and culture recognize such denials of coevality as common in exiles' imaginative engagements with their

Reina's former employers, who now live in Miami, have returned to visit: Carmen…

… and Emilio.

Reina watches from below as Carmen runs upstairs to look at "her things."

homelands, which are often psychologically invested in maintaining an image of the homeland as frozen in time. In the case of Cuba's exiles, generally speaking, this idealized image of the homeland as unchanged must also compete with an opposing strain of thinking and representation that simultaneously imagines the homeland as a dystopic place, one marked by accelerated decay, a kind of anti-Cuba ruled by a dictator who has created a country so unlike the too-perfect Cuba of the past as to be a perversion and corruption of the authentic nation and culture. Exiles' refusal of temporality and contemporary Cuban history is thus influenced both by a psychological investment in holding onto the Cuba they remember (even if this remembered place is pure fiction) as well as an active rejection of Cuba as it exists in time, i.e., the revolutionary state.

Despite the seemingly stereotypical surface treatment with which the exiles are introduced, *Reina y Rey* recognizes the powerful hold imaginings of home have on Cubans who live outside the nation-state and explores (rather than merely ridiculing) the competing sentiments that have Carmen and Emilio reflecting on Cuba as both utopia and dystopia. Throughout, in fact, the film displays some understanding of exilic consciousness and the community in Miami, with Garcia Espinosa engaging issues of exile nostalgia and denial throughout. The exiles' simultaneous longing for and disavowal of the island are represented matter-of-factly—a sign, perhaps, that Cubans have a much more intimate knowledge of their exilic others than the historical discourses of non-cooperation between the two "nations" would have us believe.

García Espinosa is also cognizant of the ways in which Miami Cubans, unable to return to a homeland that no longer exists, have tried to reconstruct the nation in exile. This understanding is evinced most directly through the disclosure of Carmen and Emilio's true reason for returning — to convince Reina to return with them to Miami to be a live-in maid for their son and care for their first grandchild. That Carmen and Emilio have returned to reclaim their old servant indicates their investment in reconstituting the past in the present, of making their contemporary life in Miami resemble, as much as possible, their life in Cuba in days past. So although the exiles are not there to lay literal, legal claim to their house, they are nonetheless making a symbolic claim on what they see as their property, with Reina synecdochically serving as a piece of their home that can be transported and repatriated to the nation in exile. The film thus engages and critiques the idea of Cuba as annex to the Miami nation.

Reina y Rey is critical of such proprietary overtures, and Espinosa's narrative eventually denies the moral legitimacy of the exiles' claim, undermining their chauvinistic sense of entitlement, but not before transforming the figure of the returning exile into that of the tourist. Indeed, what is most significant about the representation of exile return and encounter in *Reina y Rey* is the way in which Carmen and Emilio's assumptions are exposed as completely unfounded. Their so-called love for country is shown to be a complicated illusion that is served just as well by the brief, contained exposure to national culture that tourism affords, than by any actual claim to belonging.

Specifically, in one of the film's longest sequences, Carmen, Emilio and

Reina spend an evening at Havana's famous Tropicana nightclub, an icon of pre-Revolutionary nightlife and long one of Cuba's most popular tourist destinations. Reina, dressed in clothes the Miamians have brought for her, is clearly uneasy, and Emilio appears most interested in ogling mulattas; in fact these constitute his only point-of-view shots in the film. (We later learn that in the past he had an affair with his neighbor, an Afro-Cuban woman, to whom in the film he eventually reveals his enduring love and desire for reunion; again, the exile assumes some sort of continuation of things past, makes his claim to the body of the Cuban woman, and is definitively rejected.) At Tropicana, Carmen is ecstatic and sentimental. The place provokes in her a series of musings about the benefits of tourism, her feelings of nostalgia, and the lack of authentic Cuban music in Miami.

An element emphasized in this scene is the extent to which Carmen, now that she does not live in Cuba, can enjoy all the "amazing things" the country has to offer. She confesses to Reina that this is the first time she has ever been to Tropicana, and in a manner that makes the club plainly analogous to the island as a whole, she excitedly talks about the diverse riches of this utopic "paradise under the stars." Only now as a tourist does she have the opportunity to look at the country with "fresh eyes" and appreciate its beauty, one with which the camera is complicit. She goes on about nostalgic longing — how in Miami, "all we think about are our people in Cuba, and in Cuba, [all you think about are] your people in Miami." Finally, she complains about Cuban music in Miami not matching the real thing, which can only be found on the island itself. In one of only two lines uttered by Reina in the lengthy sequence, she then asks "and Celia?" referring to Celia Cruz, the lengendary Afro-Cuban singer and émigré uniquely beloved on both sides of the Florida Straits, to which both women raise their glasses in a toast. This moment instigates a change in body language, with Reina finally feeling more comfortable, even smiling, and Carmen becoming less caricaturist with her performance, which grows more naturalistic—Veloz's acting has, in fact, been the most critically applauded aspect of *Reina y Rey*.

The exiles become tourists during a long sequence shot on location in the Tropicana nightclub.

Here Carmen becomes the focal point of the sequence, emerging as the primary character with whom viewers identify. Her apparent arrogance is stripped down as she confides in Reina about never having been to the club, which to her is a source of real embarrassment, and she tears up at several points, expressing a real sadness over the divide that separates friends and families inside the island and out. The film also encourages sympathy toward Carmen by showing that she is unaware of her insensitive husband's serial lechery, a detail that increases her vulnerability. Overall the Tropicana sequence, which begins with an uncomfortable distance between the two women — a despondent old *Habanera* and a loud Miami Cuban — ends with a sense of shared intimacy.

This sequence operates on multiple levels, as it deals with intersecting issues of tourism, *doble moral*, and power, in addition to reconciliation and the construction of transnational cultural identity. In one sense, it attests to Cuban cinema's engagement with issues of exile nostalgia, showing the extent to which culture produced on the island is aware of, and at times even sympathetic to, the preoccupations and longings of Cubans living outside the nation-state. The fact that the sequence begins by stressing Reina's discomfort with and estrangement from Carmen and Emilio and ends with a brief moment of transnational understanding, prompted by their mutual respect for Celia Cruz, reflects a conciliatory point of view and draws attention to the role of popular culture in mediating the discourse of reconciliation. However, the scene is also critical of the power dynamics that shape exile return, emphasizing Emilio's sexual-colonialist attitude and Carmen's presumptuous social demeanor. In Reina's face one can read a critique of the social and cultural repercussions of dollarization and the doubled economy, as she, who has been desperately searching for food to give her dog, watches food and drink be indiscriminately wasted at the club in shots that foreground her subjective point-of-view.

That one of the lengthiest sequences of the film is shot in the Tropicana club—where Garcia Espinosa lingers on the dancers, showmanship, and professionalism of the space in a straightforward manner that is stylistically similar to commercial touristic visual culture—suggests at least a nominal complicity with the exigencies of that market. Later there is an extended montage sequence, which depicts the trio touring other Havana landmarks — the Cathedral, the steps of the University of Havana, where they take photos — and eating at populated cafes, where roving *son* guitarists serenade them. The amount of time the camera spends exploring such touristic sites suggests the film's interest in advancing of that market. This feeling of complicity with the tourist sector is bolstered, too, by Carmen's speech about how satisfying it is to engage with her homeland as a tourist. Carmen is unironic about her delight with the shift in perspective that now has her seeing Cuba from the eyes of a visitor instead of a resident.

What is most significant about the scene is that only once Carmen begins to behave more like a tourist and less like a presumptuous returning exile does Espinosa encourage some viewer identification with her, in the

The exiles take Reina on a tour of Havana.

García Espinosa foregrounds some of the city's major landmarks and tourist destinations.

editing and through her performance. As she becomes more sympathetic, so too the discourse of reconciliation becomes more transparent, as the two women make their toasts and Carmen says, "It's time to open the window and let a little air in," thus setting the tone for the exterior touring scenes that follow this sequence, taking us from the dark, socially claustrophobic space of the club to the brightly lit, open framing of the city.

This sympathetic portrayal of Carmen at the Tropicana club and representation of a more conciliatory exile-national relationship are made possible precisely because Carmen in this scene is no longer coded as a returning exile—she is not making social or material claims to her things, her house, or her neighborhood (nor, for that matter, is she being hyper-critical and acting like a know-it-all). More than simply humbled, Carmen is ecstatic with the thrill of discovery that this touristic encounter affords and expresses a kind of gratitude for it. Thus it is precisely Carmen's enthusiasm about being a *foreigner* that makes her less threatening, less arrogant, and ultimately, more sympathetic.

In this respect *Reina y Rey* presents an inversion whereby the exile must be stripped of his or her nationalism and made into a foreigner and tourist in order to be incorporated into the homeland. As Rob Nixon has aptly written, when used in an exilic context, the word *return*, "summons to mind, above all, emotional and economic claims to land" (149). It is logical that overtures toward reconciliation and transnational dialogue are more likely to be made in a context in which émigrés are not seen as threatening in this way. Transforming the figure of the returning exile into a tourist diminishes the former's associations with reclamation and restitution. The figure of the émigré tourist — even better, the Cuban American tourist — is not enacting a homeland journey of return but is, significantly, *just visiting*. As tourists, moreover, émigrés bring hard currency to the island, which has come, positively, to associate them with economic growth in the doubled economy, as opposed to material repossession.

Since 1990 the promotion of international tourism has been the most successful economic development program initiated during the Special Period. In the nineties, the sector grew at an average of eighteen percent each year, and by 1993, tourism had overtaken the sugar industry as the primary producer of export revenue. Officially designated as the leading economic development program, the Ministry of Tourism (MINTUR) was created with the goal of making Cuban tourism structurally competitive with other destinations in the Caribbean. Despite the U.S. embargo's continued restrictions on travel, tourists with U.S. citizenship are estimated to have increased tenfold during the decade, according to the World Tourist Organization. One of the more interesting aspects in the reporting of these statistics, however, is the Cuban government's assertion that the majority of U.S. visitors to the island are, in fact, Cuban Americans (Espino 364).

It is not the precision of these numbers that matters here so much as the Cuban government's desire to publicize them. By emphasizing the extent to which Cuban Americans are returning as visitors, Cuba strategically, and somewhat ingeniously, intervenes in the discourse of exile hardliners who have actively promoted a policy of total economic disengagement with their homeland since the sixties, a stance that certainly precludes travel, not to

At the National Capitol Building.

Carmen mentions that the Cathedral in Old Havana is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Carmen and Reina enjoy daiquiris at the Floridita, an Ernest Hemingway haunt popular with tourists.

The lighting and tone change when Carmen reveals her plans for Reina to return with them

mention remittances, third-party investments, and even telephone calls. Of course, in reality, contact between Cuban Americans and Cubans has always been much more commonplace than exile lobby groups and hegemonic voices emanating from Miami would admit. As David Rieff of the World Policy Institute points out, there is a contradiction between the polls that show Miami Cubans overwhelmingly supporting the embargo and the number of phone calls this group makes to Cuba each day (84). In the nineties, however, such transnational ties were becoming more public. The Cuban government's exposure and publicizing of these ties — which, in addition to depicting Cuban American tourism as both desirable and normal, also meant the political destigmatization and active encouragement of dollar remittances, key to economic survival — is representative of the tidal shift that has been taking place in Cuban-exile relations during the Special Period.

Reina y Rey seeks in part to further discursive currency of reconciliation in the context of an economic transnationalism already taking place. When Carmen is shown participating in the economy as a tourist, when she is shown taking photographs and enjoying herself at Havana's major landmarks, she manifests behavior that in other context might be interpreted as obnoxious, or as loud and gauche. In *Reina y Rey*, however, the minor or comic cultural insensitivities that accompany touristic behaviors are presented as just that, minor and comic — and rather than serving to alienate viewers, Carmen's over-the-top enthusiasm and lack of critical self-reflection are somehow endearing. Indeed if Carmen behaves like an "ugly American," it is thankfully so, since such behavior functions as a reminder that her visit is temporary; she will not and cannot stay. When she evinces any preference for the way things are done in Miami, this serves to make her more ridiculous and by extension less threatening.

In fact it is just when Carmen prepares to leave the country that she lets slip how American she has become, and it is in that moment that *Reina y Rey* fully reveals its most striking irony—Carmen becomes most sympathetic in the very act of disavowing the nation she has just re-revisited. In this scene she has an outburst, because Reina has not shown up to say good-bye and is, by extension, refusing the offer to join the family in Miami. The previous evening Carmen has been filling out visa applications with a typically reticent Reina, who even while giving the pertinent information never says that she will emigrate. On the contrary, when it is revealed that Carmen does not even know Reina's real name, which is Yolanda, viewers understand that the continuation of this employer-employee "friendship," or the repatriation of Reina to a pre-revolutionary work structure in the exiled nation, can never take place.

When the film cuts from the visa application scene to the following day, with Carmen, anxious about missing her flight, pacing about in front of Reina's front door and complaining to the neighbor about Reina's failure to show up, even calling Reina an "ingrate," Carmen's performance is amusingly manic. After having throughout the film shown Carmen rhapsodizing and tearing up with love for her homeland, enthusiastically touring Havana, and intimately expressing her nostalgia and sadness over her remove from friends and family — a category in which she includes her former domestic servant, now "ingrate" — Espinosa shows just how easily Carmen's bottomless love for country can turn shallow. In the most satisfying and unexpected moment of the departure scene, Carmen makes her move toward the rental car to leave for the airport and says that she cannot believe Reina's preference for "this shitty country."

to Miami in order to work as their grandson's nanny.

Reina tells Carmen that her real name is Yolanda.

Carmen believes that Reina will leave the country with them. But when it's time to go to the airport, Reina is nowhere to be found.

Carmen tells a neighbor that she always treated

With this line of dialogue, Carmen solidifies her identity as Cuban American tourist and expresses a clear desire to return home — to Miami. The moment works as satire, since it shows Carmen's hypocrisy, but it is allows empathy too, because Carmen is self-identifying, not as an exile waiting for her chance to return to Cuba and reclaim it, but as a typical tourist who has had enough and is ready to get out of the Third World. Unlike her over-the-top declarations of love for the homeland, Carmen's disavowal appears less vicious than self-aware, as if on some level, she finally understands that she really cannot recreate the past.

In the film's final sequence, the camera follows Carmen into the car. As she gets in, García Espinosa shows her in close-up for her last shot, in which she turns to the neighbor and asks her to relay a message to Reina. "Tell her," she begins, and then after a pregnant pause continues, "tell her I left dying with laughter." If only briefly, Carmen again shows that she masks vulnerability and is genuinely wounded by Reina's failure to appear. She simultaneously lives up to and undercuts her own stereotype, achieving some sympathy just as (not coincidentally) everything serves to emphasize her departure — the bags, the rental car, her travel costuming, and this last line of dialogue, which posits her absence as an already accomplished fact.

If, at the beginning of the film, Garcia Espinosa introduces Carmen and Emilio as returning exiles, returning to *their* house and assuming that things can resume as they left them, by its conclusion, he strips the two characters of such illusions and shows that they are best served by the brief, manageable exposures to "national culture" that tourism affords; exposures that make Carmen's claim that she "left dying with laughter" more plausible than one might think. This process whereby the film deconstructs the figure of returning exile — debunking the proprietary claims upon which much exilic identity is based — and constructs in its place the figure of the Cuban American tourist, builds a case that the "exiles" have at bottom no *real* interest in returning to Cuba, because they have become so fully Americanized. Such a perception, furthermore, functions to render them more, not less, fully accepted into the homeland.

The relatively sympathetic representation of exiles in *Reina y Rey*, as well as the film's promotion of the tourist sector and the new category of exile as tourist, reflect émigrés increased value in the new economy and the extent to which market demands are helping shape representational practices. It is emblematic of a kind of pragmatic coming to terms with the rise of tourism in the doubled economy. Some critics find fault with the manner in which García Espinosa — the theorist responsible for "Imperfect Cinema," and longtime leader in a national film industry internationally known for its revolutionary socialist politics and aesthetic innovation — made a film that shows signs of complicity with capitalistic interests.

Such a perspective, however, would constitute a kind of fetishization of national cultural authenticity and assign an ahistorical interpretive rigidity to theorizations that were never intended to reify filmmaking in Cuba. Even before the Special Period, in his essay "For an Imperfect Cinema… Fifteen Years Later," García Espinosa emphasized that Imperfect Cinema has always been an evolving, adaptive process. The fact that García Espinosa, a founder and director of ICAIC from 1983-1991, had experience negotiating Cuba's film administration may have contributed to his sense of pragmatism. As a leader at ICAIC, he was known as a collectivist who accommodated new young talent and worked to increase co-productions with filmmakers in Latin America. In 2001 García Espinosa advanced what is probably the most liberal definition of Cuban revolutionary cinema to

Reina as a family member.

Reina will not be repatriated to the nation in exile. She chooses instead to wait it out and see if Rey will return.

date, saying,

> "*Para mi un cine revolucionario hoy es el cine que logre abrirle un espacio al cine de los transnacionales norte-americanos. Sea perfecto, imperfecto, o el que sea*" (quoted in Ricciarelli 41). (For me, revolutionary cinema today is a cinema that makes room for itself despite the North American transnational corporations, whether it is perfect, imperfect, or whatever.)

There can be no clearer statement on the extent to which contemporary Cuban cinema, given the economic crisis and global dominance of major transnational corporations, has little choice in whether or not to negotiate the economic demands of the market. The film industry is in no way immune from the belief, popularly held among Cubans, that they invent their economy day by day. Instead of reading *Reina y Rey*'s in terms of ideological loss, it is much more useful to see in it a portrayal of Cuba's changing reality, one that is increasingly engaged with foreign capital. Tracing how images of exile return have evolved with this increased transnational sector — and specifically tourism — suggests that contemporary Cuban economics may be breaking down the distances that have traditionally separated exiles and nationals, for better or worse.

Reina y Rey was not the first ICAIC-produced film to deal with the exile-national relationship. Jesus Diaz's *Lejanía* (1985), distributed in the United States as *A Parting of the Ways*, and Ana Rodríguez's short film *Laura*, one of the five shorts making up the feature-length anthology *Mujer Transparente* (1990), are two earlier examples. These films focused on the emotional and psychic divides separating exiles and nationals, presenting somewhat pessimistic stories of private loss and abandonment. *Reina y Rey,* with its lighter, more conciliatory approach, introduces a new trend in Cuban cinema during the Special Period, one that favors a reconfiguration of the exile as a transnational traveler. By 2001, Humberto Solás could make a film like *Miel Para Oshún* (*Honey for Oshun*), the first Cuban film to present a narrative focused entirely around a Cuban American character's subjectivity (that character is also played by one of Cuba's biggest stars, Jorge Perugorría). It treats the issue of exile reconciliation with an enthusiastic explicitness and presents Cuban American touring as an opportunity for the construction of cultural identity.

In *Reina y Rey*, Garcia Espinosa succeeded in teasing out certain changing realities in Cuban life whereby the figure of the exile was replaced with the figure of the transnational. To examine the political-economic context in which this shift has occurred is not to argue that it was merely a byproduct of new business practices and policies, but these must be taken into account. Too often, in studies of diaspora and nation-state relations, culture, imagination and subjectivity on one hand, and mobile capital and state power on the other, are posited as mutually exclusive categories. Analyses of the Cuban case, so fraught and rich with the many paradoxes, doublings, and seemingly incommensurable realities characteristic of life in the Special Period, could never support such a dichotomous separation.

Go to works cited page

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Andean realism and the integral sequence shot

by [David M.J. Wood](#)

Brochure for the exhibition of *The Clandestine Nation* (1989) in Belgium, distributed by Libération-Films.

In a didactic brochure produced for the exhibition of the 1989 Bolivian feature film *La nación clandestina* (The Clandestine Nation), the Ukamau Group's director Jorge Sanjinés set out his critique of the Western concept of time. For Sanjinés, Western time

> "begins with a genesis and is projected towards the infinite until meeting with the final judgement. It is a world-view in which what has passed can never return, and for that reason [the West] is a culture that disdains the past, casting it as outdated, obsolete, only fit for adorning museums." (Sanjinés 1990)[1] [[open endnotes in new window](#)]

By contrast, his new picture *La nación clandestina* was steeped in a cyclical Aymara notion of time, in which

> "the past constantly returns, people coexist with the past and the future can be behind us rather than ahead, [...] in order to move forwards we need to look backwards, we must contemplate and reflect upon that past, but by incorporating it into the present we are turning it into the future."

The highland Aymara, together with the Quechua, make up the bulk of Bolivia's majority indigenous population; both groups are concentrated mainly in Bolivia's
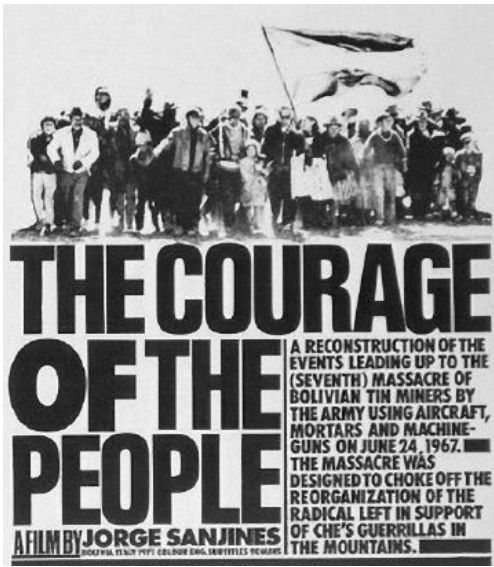
Poster for *The Courage of the People* (1971), in which the Ukamau Group denounces and reconstructs massacres of mining communities in Bolivia from 1942 to 1967. The film was made alongside survivors of the "Night of San Juan" massacre, in the town of Siglo Veinte in 1967. One of them was Domitila Barrios de Chungara, who related her own version of the ordeal in her testimony *Si me permiten hablar* (1977).
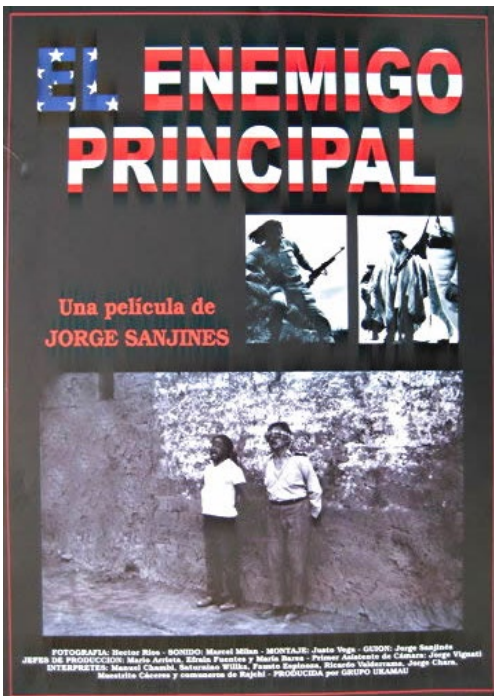
Poster for *The Principal Enemy* (1973), a film that debates the collaboration between indigenous peasants and leftwing guerrilleros in the Peruvian highlands, using a combination of sequence shots and distancing techniques.

Andean west. In drawing on the intellectual heritage of the Aymara in *La nación clandestina*, Sanjinés continued the Ukamau Group's deep involvement with Andean culture that dated back more than thirty years.[2]

By working Aymara time into his film form, Sanjinés did not seek merely to conserve or to express an indigenous world-view. Neither were his Aymara protagonists to be seen largely as a privileged revolutionary vanguard for whom cinema might serve as a tool of consciousness-raising and political mobilization, in the manner of his earlier features such as *El coraje del pueblo* (The Courage of the People, Bolivia, 1971) or *Jatun Auka* (The Principal Enemy, Peru, 1973). Rather, in the 1989 brochure Sanjinés cast Aymaran temporality as the basis on which to build a new sense of Bolivian nationality, seeped in indigenous morality, democratic reciprocity and environmentalism. Faced with what he saw as a widespread crisis of identity on the part of a symbolically "uprooted" Bolivian people, *La nación clandestina* was to make the Ukamau Group's case for

> "an organic nation, complete, free and respected, in which *all* Bolivians, maintaining their own characteristics, have the same rights, are respected, loved, and accepted by the rest" (Sanjinés 1990; emphasis in original).

As I will argue in this essay, the ideological posture that Sanjinés adopts here and the formal strategies he develops to express it in *La nación clandestina*, both based on an idealized conception of Andean cosmology, are problematic in their reworking of European film theory's discussions of realism. Yet they are also productive aesthetic discourses in the context of late 1980s Bolivian politics.

1989, the year of *La nación clandestina*'s release, marked the end of the second presidential period of stalwart Bolivian politican Víctor Paz Estenssoro. Paz had first come to power following the 1952 Revolution, when his Revolutionary Nationalist Movement (MNR) embarked on a populist program of nationalizing capitalist reform and modernisation of a deeply unequal, oligarchic and in some senses quasi-feudal society.[3] The MNR ruled until 1964, and although the following two decades were dominated by authoritarian military regimes, the post-1952 revolutionary nationalism continued to shape Bolivian politics.[4] During these years the mining and worker sectors provided the base of the left's continued capacity for radical mass mobilization. Stable civilian rule returned with the democratic leftist presidency of Hernán Siles Zuazo from 1982-1985 (Siles had previously governed for the MNR from 1956-1960). Paz Estenssoro's 1985-1989 term initiated the onset of neoliberal reform in Bolivia, against the backdrop of the traditional institutional left's crippling weakness and the general decline of the MNR's guiding narrative of revolutionary nationalism (Dunkerley 2007).

The short 1980s (from 1982), then, constituted a transitional period from military dictatorship to liberal-democratic rule. These years also saw an ongoing political
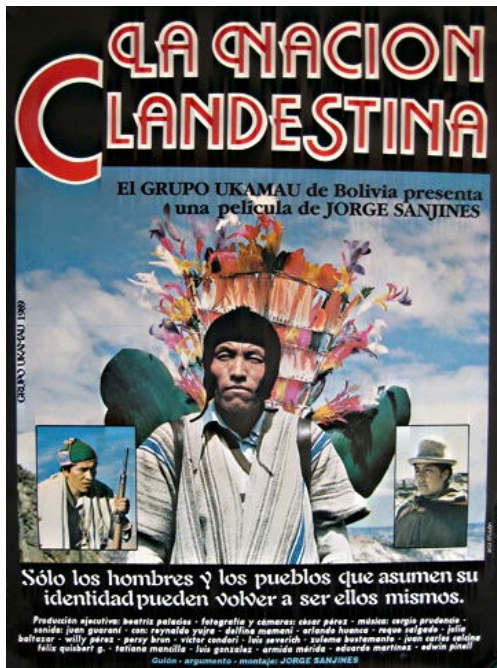
In *The Clandestine Nation* (1989), protagonist Sebastián (Reynaldo Yujra) travels across the Bolivian altiplano in his rediscovery of ancestral Aymara cultural values.
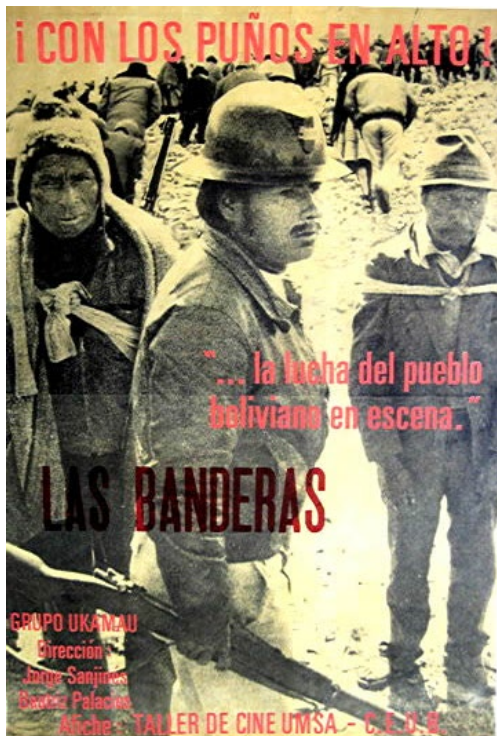
The Flags of Dawn (1983) documents popular street protests in early 1980s Bolivia, during the transition from military dictatorship to democratic rule.

realignment in Bolivia of the constituencies on which the Ukamau Group's films had focused, and that had formed a crucial part of their audiences, since the 1960s: mining communities (most explicitly portrayed in *El coraje del pueblo*) and the highland Andean indigenous populations. The Aymara *katarista* movement dated back to the 1960s, when it had emerged as a counter-hegemonic ideological force articulated most forcefully by Aymara intellectual Fausto Reinaga, advocating self-determining Aymara political and cultural struggle in opposition to the MNR's co-optation of Bolivia's largely indigenous peasantry into its nation-building project. In the 1980s, though, *katarismo* underwent a process of restructuring that would give way to an electoral alliance between the movement's moderate wing and the now-neoliberal MNR during the 1993-1997 presidential period. *Katarismo*'s more radical strain, meanwhile, would prove instrumental in the reconfiguration of the Bolivian political landscape in the early years of the twenty-first century (Albó 1992; Sanjinés C. 2004a; Sanjinés C. 2004b).

As debates over indigenous identity moved towards the mainstream of Bolivian politics, the miners' historical political clout was fraying but by no means extinguished. The sector fell into crisis during the neoliberal adjustments of the second half of the 1980s. By April 1989, just months before *La nación clandestina* picked up a Concha de Oro prize during its premiere at the San Sebsatian film festival, protests by redundant miners were in full swing in La Paz to considerable public sympathy. By now, according to James Dunkerley's account, "there was an increase in talk of the country's historic debt to the miners, [and] public recognition of their sacrifice" (Dunkerley 2007: 174). Even so, many former miners were turning to the coca trade that served both the legal production and consumption of the coca leaf that was (and is) central to everyday life and ritual in the Andean region, and the illegal production of cocaine that boomed during this decade (Dunkerley 2007).

As several critics and commentators have noted, *La nación clandestina* in a sense marks a rupture with most of the Ukamau Group's previous productions, which had been firmly anchored in the direct political contexts in which they were produced:

- the documentary *Las banderas del amanecer* (The Flags of Dawn, Bolivia, 1983, directed by Jorge Sanjinés and Beatriz Palacios), made from footage of popular protests and mobilizations during the early 1980s dictatorships and the transition to democratic rule;
- *Lloksy Kaymanta!* (Get Out of Here!, Ecuador, 1977), on the collusion between the military, transnational mining interests and evangelist missionaries in an Ecuadorian Andean community;
- *Jatun Auka* (Peru, 1973), which debated the possibilities and drawbacks of collaboration between Andean peasants and Marxist guerrillas;
- the aforementioned *El coraje del pueblo* (1971), set against the ongoing struggles of mining communities in twentieth-century Bolivia; and
- *Yawar Mallku* (Blood of the Condor, 1969), which played an active part in the expulsion from Bolivia of the US Peace Corps, which was allegedly conducting covert sterilisation programmes in Bolivian indigenous communities.[5]

Although *La nación clandestina* indeed works on a symbolic, moral and allegorical rather than an immediately political level, both the film itself and Jorge Sanjinés' comments cited at the beginning of this essay can be read in terms of a concern for a general social splintering in the face of neoliberal reform. They are also symptomatic of a search for a valid oppositional narrative responding to indigenous values at a time when both Bolivian revolutionary nationalism and the Marxist left of which Sanjinés was very much a part were losing currency both at home and globally. In the presidential elections of May 1989 Carlos Palenque's nationalist and personalist Condepa party stepped successfully into this void: a political movement linked to Palenque`s popular television program *La tribunal libre del pueblo* (The Open Tribunal of the People) (Himpele 2008).[6] *La nación clandestina* offers a clear counterpoint to the mass-media appeal of Palenque's populist mobilization of indigenous ethnicity (Schiwy 2009: 105).

Sanjinés' "organic nation" can also be read in the context of ongoing debates over the

Get Out of Here! (1977) plays out popular reactions to the collaboration between the military, transnational mining interests and evangelist missionaries in an Ecuadorian Andean community.

In *The Clandestine Nation*, Sebastián, carrying the Jacha Tata Danzante mask on his back, leaves the city of La Paz as gunshots punctuate the soundtrack.

As Sebastián walks across the *altiplano*, he encounters a roadblock installed by indigenous protesters…

plurinational and pluricultural status of the Bolivian nation, which would be enshrined in the 1994 constitution instituted by the neoliberal MNR/*katarista* government, and that would take a more radical turn in the following decade under president Evo Morales. As I will discuss in the following section, *La nación clandestina* is centered around the figure of its Aymara protagonist Sebastian, whose story is cut across but not defined by the immediate political events surrounding him. Because the 1989 picture creates a more horizontal dialogue between indigenous identity and national politics, that film might seem to offer a partial corrective to the teleological vision of political progress that, for some critics, appropriated or eclipsed debates over cultural and ethnic identity in the Ukamau Group's previous productions. Molly Geidel, for instance, holds that in the case of *Yawar Mallku*, "even as it condemns [the US model of] modernization, the film reiterates modernization theory's imperative to transform populations from feminized passive indigeneity to masculine nationalist subjecthood" (2010: 764): a state in which the awakened indigenous subject "finally attains a revolutionary consciousness and returns to lead his people" (778). In the next section I will begin to consider the extent to which a similar critique might be leveled against *La nación clandestina* and Sanjinés' broader conception of national renewal in late 1980s Bolivia.[7]

Indigeneity and national renewal

La nación clandestina dramatizes the Bolivian nation as a traumatic ethnic encounter, charting the journey of Sebastián Maisman (Reynaldo Yujra) from El Alto, the Aymara city above Bolivia's *de facto* capital La Paz, back to his *ayllu* (community) Willkani.[8] Sebastián had previously forsaken his Aymara roots to live in the city: like Sixto, hero of *Yawar Mallku*, at one point he angrily declares "I'm not an Indian!." His adopted surname "Maisman" is a Hispanized version of his original Aymara surname "Mamani." Some years later, as community leader, he is discovered embezzling aid money for Willkani from a U.S. organisation. This leads to his definitive expulsion from Willkani. In the film's narrative "present," Sebastián embarks on a final return to the *ayllu* to dance the Jacha Tata Danzante, a long-forgotten self-sacrificial ritual performed in times of crisis by an *ayllu* member who dances until dying of exhaustion. The film closes with Sebastián dancing the Jacha Tata, just as it had opened with Sebastián as a young boy witnessing the since-forgotten rite.

The plot's main strand, centred around the disgrace of Sebastián and his redemption through a rediscovery of ancestral Aymara values and traditions, is set against a historical backdrop that encompasses numerous key moments in recent Bolivian history. In the narrative "present," Sebastián resolves to return to Willkani as bloody military action strikes La Paz. Although the film offers no precise historical reference, Souza (1999: 253-254) reasonably surmises that these scenes are set during the crisis of November 1979, when the brief but vicious fortnight of Colonel Alberto Natusch Busch's military rule (1-16 November) was succeeded by the vulnerable interim presidency of Lidia Gueiler (16 November 1979-17 July 1980). The Gueiler government, following IMF dictates, delivered an economic package that included currency devaluation and an end to fuel subsidies. In response, the *katarista*-led CSUTCB, Bolivia's national peasant union, organized a massive roadblock that paralysed the country's transportation network and cut off the major cities for a week, provoking violent reactions from both military and non-indigenous civilian quarters (Dunkerley 1984: 249-291; Choque Canqui 2011: 27-28). This is the backdrop against which Sebastián's story unfolds.

As Sebastián crosses the *altiplano* by foot, he remembers his own past that is cut across by political encounters and negotiations between the state and the Andean peasantry in recent Bolivian history. In one flashback, Sebastián, employed as a Ranger in the Bolivian military, vainly attempts to convince his brother and father to surrender the arms that they keep to defend themselves and their political rights. This is a clear reference to the Military-Peasant Pact secured by the regime of General René Barrientos (1964-1969): a system of patronage under which the indigenous peasantry pledged loyalty to the army in its fight against leftist

… and he refuses to help a leftwing militant student fleeing from the army. This scene can be seen as a critique of the mutual incomprehension that has historically divided leftwing and indigenous politics in Bolivia: a problem that Sanjinés' films have consistently sought to remedy.

In a flashback, set during the Military-Peasant Pact of the 1960s, Sebastián tries and fails to disarm his brother Vicente. Such flashbacks do not serve to build narrative tension, but rather form part of an integral experience of past and present moments from Sebastián's life.

subversion in exchange for the government's guarantee to uphold benefits already gained by the indigenous peasantry such as agrarian reform, and educational and union rights (Dunkerley 1984: 132).[9] Sebastián's final redemption owes much to his readiness to see the error of having sided with the indigenous peasantry's collaboration with and co-optation by the authoritarian state. At the film's close, Sebastián's final arrival in Willkani to dance the Jacha Tata Danzante coincides with the return to the *ayllu* of his fellow community members, who bear their dead after fighting in solidarity with their mining comrades during the 1979 crisis. In stark contrast to the Peasant-Military Pact of the previous decade, this strategic alliance between the indigenous peasantry and the miners in opposition to the repressive actions of the military is seen as sowing the seeds of an emancipatory future.

This most crucial scene of *La nación* dramatizes the conflict between, on the one hand, the folkloric and historical revival of indigenous traditions embodied by Sebastián's redemption, and on the other, the social and political struggle represented by the *ayllu* members' solidarity with the miners. Freya Schiwy has read this *dénouement* of *La nación clandestina* as a vindication of the Ukamau Group's consistent framing of indigenous knowledge "as the time of socialist revolution" (2009: 102). For Schiwy, *La nación clandestina* ultimately "insists on the primacy of social struggle over cultural revival":

> "The dance reintegrates [Sebastián] with his estranged community […], but his sacrifice appears utterly meaningless in this context […;] he no longer actively contributes to the present struggle. […] The film integrates indigenous culture at large into the Marxist-*indigenista* view that prioritizes class struggle against imperialism." (Schiwy 2009: 105)

Schiwy argues that since Sebastián's cultural redemption separates him from his politically engaged community, and since Sebastián's ultimate sacrifice remains in the cultural sphere, emptied of any repercussions on the immediate political present, the film "seems to flatten the powerful Andean concept of *nayrapacha*": the notion that "the past is seen as a guide for the future" (Schiwy 2009: 98).[10] In contrast, Schiwy holds that *nayrapacha* is one of the two Andean concepts of time that effectively structure contemporary indigenous video in Bolivia. [11]

The second concept is *pachakuti*. Unlike the linear, post-Enlightenment European notion of revolution that implies the progressive institution of a new order, *pachakuti* implies an epochal shift in which "the present can brew an "other" time, and that time can be at once a future and a re-play of the past"; it means that "a temporal cycle has matured and the time has come for an alteration, an overturning in which indigenous society will recover control over colonised space" (Rivera Cusicanqui 2011: 60-61). Following Schiwy's argument, the detachment between Sebastián's cultural restitution of the past and the community's present-day political struggle prevents the film from being read as an epistemologically-grounded vindication of Andean concepts of transformation.

Towards the film's end, Sebastián dances the Jacha Tata Danzante as the members of his *ayllu* return from fighting in solidarity with the miners. They assail him…

… but the village elder Uncle Tankara (second from right) intervenes on his behalf, explaining the cultural importance of Sebastián's sacrifice.

I agree that class analysis remains at the forefront of *La nación clandestina*. It is

worth noting that in a 1989 essay setting out the formal, technical and philosophical bases of the film's aesthetics, Sanjinés refers consistently and vaguely to Andean "cosmovision" and "ideology": not once does he refer directly to *nayrapacha* or *pachakuti*. When writing on Andean music, he notes that its structures "obey a group logic, a collective practice, an ideology that prioritises communitarian interests" (1989: 69). There is more than a trace here of the "Inca communism" that the Peruvian intellectual José Carlos Mariátegui had proposed some sixty years previously, which sought to harness a supposed pre-existing communist tradition in indigenous society to promote the goal of a revolutionary national renewal.[12] Sanjinés, then, is far from achieving the effective "decolonization of knowledge" performed by the subsequent indigenous video projects on which Schiwy's book focuses, which question and offer alternatives to the ideas of nation and revolution. I would argue, however, that *La nación clandestina*'s narrative structure and its revision of realist cinematic aesthetics equally suggest that in the context of post-dictatorship Bolivia, *political* action is meaningless if not accompanied by a corresponding cultural revival. Rather than simply subordinating the cultural to an existing model of revolutionary nationalism, I believe, Sanjinés' 1989 picture can lay claim to a place in the (albeit limited) *re-imagining* of the Bolivian nation during its transition to democracy, even though some of its underlying philosophical premises might lack precision, and even though it may have been surpassed by later political and audiovisual developments.

In *The Clandestine Nation* long-shots and extreme long-shots predominate, often highlighting the relationship between the indigenous protagonists and the harsh Andean landscape.

Close-ups and medium-shots are also used, particularly in urban scenes. In this scene in Sebastián's workshop in El Alto, the camera's relative proximity to Sebastián conveys a sense of claustrophobia, both physically and morally, as the drunken protagonist, who has lost spiritual contact with his Aymara community, talks of his misfortunes.

Scenes of indigenous meetings and festivals are typically filmed with ...

...circular hand-held camera movements and long-shots.

In another flashback, Sebastián enlists in the army…

Theory of Andean realism: Noël Burch/André Bazin/Jorge Sanjinés

Some years ago, when I was looking into the links between Jorge Sanjinés' cinematic praxis from the 1960s to the 1980s and contemporary European film theory, cinematographer César Pérez pointed out to me the formative influence that the work of Noël Burch had had for the group.[13] [open endnotes in new window] Indeed, the rejection of Western, industrial or bourgeois cinema expressed by the Ukamau Group during their militant phase, in common with other contemporary militant Latin American filmmakers such as the Argentines Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino (Sanjinés and Grupo Ukamau 1979; Solanas and Getino 1973), can certainly be aligned to an extent with Burch's critique of the Institutional Mode of Representation (IMR) (Burch 1973).[14]

Burch poses that mainstream narrative cinema, with its roots in the nineteenth-century novel, creates an illusory "transparent narrative time" that, by negating the materiality of the cinematic process, equates its own ideologically-charged language with "reality." The IMR's narrative time is erected upon a "linear discourse," resting on a set of narrative codes that ensures the seamless glide of plot at the expense of the symbolic or metaphorical properties of the filmed image. Such false transparency, which Burch describes as the "zero point of cinematic style," has become stripped of its legitimacy and universality. It is therefore up to the oppositional filmmaker to forge their own idiom, finding

> "a truly consistent relationship between a film's spatial and temporal articulations and its narrative content, formal structure determining narrative structure as much as vice versa" (1973: 15).

Yet while Burch embraces a radical modernist film practice that might deconstruct the aesthetic premises of dominant cinema, the Ukamau Group has taken quite a different path. *La nación clandestina*, faced with the immediate social urgency of communicating with a wide constituency of viewers and of participating directly in political change, bypasses the deconstructive stage of Burch's process and sets about building a "new" cinematic grammar based on Andean temporality. This would seem to confirm Michael Chanan's (1997) observation, writing in 1985, that radical "new" film practices in Latin America since the early 1960s bore certain parallels with their European and North American counterparts insofar as their attemps to unhinge certain institutionalized grammatical norms in mainstream cinema. But, argues Chanan, while European and North American film cultures often tend to lean on structuralist and formalist theoretical concepts to call into question and deconstruct the truth-value of the image, for Latin American filmmakers

> "truth is far more immediate and material [; … it] lies in the relationship with the audience, in the film's mode of address, because the meaning of what is shown depends on the viewer's position" (1997: 215).

With *La nación clandestina*, Sanjinés sought to construct a new cinematic grammar based on his own prior deconstruction of mainstream cinema, which in turn, by the filmmaker's own account, was informed by many years of communication and mutual critique with indigenous actors and audiences.[15]

…a job that involves terrorising the civilian population. In this scene, Sebastián is beaten by his superior for not taking part in the extra-judicial killing of a suspected subversive.

Near the beginning of *The Clandestine Nation*, the village elder Uncle Tankara voices a circular notion of time that is bound up in Andean cosmovision.

At the beginning of a series of sequence shots, Sebastián is captured by the inhabitants of Willkani…

In what is perhaps his most important theoretical essay since *Teoría y práctica junto al pueblo* (Sanjinés and Grupo Ukamau 1979),[16] Sanjinés outlines the "integral sequence shot," the visual and narrative lynchpin of *La nación clandestina*, which was still in production when the essay was written (Sanjinés 1989). Here, Andean thought is characterized as a system in which "the collective prevails over the individual," while Quechua narrative form ("Quechua," it seems, is used as shorthand for Andean here) "is built upon the prior divulging of the plot, so that the contents of the story take precedence over the ins and outs of the narrative" (Sanjinés 1989: 66). Western cinema, with its grammatical preference for close-ups, intrigue and identification with a single main character, is seen as dramatically consistent with a world-view founded on the Hellenic-Judeo-Christian belief in a unique deity in the image of man. This culture, for Sanjinés, is associated with a pervasive individualism that has spawned the sanctity of private property, personal accumulation and the dominance of man over man. Western cinematic narrative reflects Western philosophy's conception of time and space as quantifiable, measurable and saleable substances, malleable to the needs of the individual. Its modes of storytelling naturally fragment time and space, re-assembling them according to the dramatic needs of plot.

Sanjinés therefore argues for a film praxis that respects the natural unity of time and space by "neutralizing" plot and by using "integral" sequence shots and long-shots with deep focus, allowing the filmed image to encompass all of the protagonists of a scene rather than privileging a single character who drives the narrative forward. Decisions regarding scale and angle of shot, mobility of the frame, length of take and rhythm of editing are determined by the needs of the action: the cinematographer is subordinate to the actors playing out the scene. The proposal goes beyond a mere technical one: the "internal mechanics" must respond to a "clearly-defined proposal" (Sanjinés 1989: 66). Sanjinés is at pains to emphasize that the approach developed for *La nación clandestina* corrects the methodological and philosophical imposition of Western values that he himself had detected in the earlier film *Yawar Mallku* (1969). The 1989 picture is no longer an outsider's interpretation of an "alien" reality, but rather the film writes itself into and becomes a part of that reality:

> "In our previous attempts we basically tried to convey the impression that the viewer was participating within the scene. The camera's movement was an interpretation of its own point of view and it selected moments and framing on the basis of the natural and logical interests of dramatic action [...]
>
> [In *La nación clandestina*], so as not to go on imposing an alien, external, intrusive, dominating point of view, [...] the rhythm was to be determined from *within* [the action], by the movement of people and things, which both provided the motivation for and generated camera movements, close-ups and long shots that served to integrate the entire group." (Sanjinés 1989: 68-70)

In the same essay the Bolivian director evokes the "reflexive space" that his new methodology opens up. Although Sanjinés does not mention André Bazin by name here, the integral sequence shot and its reflexive spaces owe much to the work of the French critic. I would argue that both in this theoretical essay and in the film it describes, *La nación clandestina*, Sanjinés both builds upon and surpasses Bazinian realism, not merely offering the viewer the opportunity to enter into and explore a cinematically-recreated reality, but to transform that reality as an extension of everyday life. The success of this strategy is a matter for debate.

Writing in the early 1950s, Bazin traced a tradition of realism, in opposition to montage-based cinema, back to the work of silent-era directors F.W. Murnau, Robert Flaherty and, in particular, Erich von Stroheim, in whose films "reality lays itself bare like a suspect confessing under the relentless examination of the commissioner of police" (Bazin 1967: 27). Bazin further admires the use of

…and brought to trial before the community (here Sebastián wears a pointed hat).
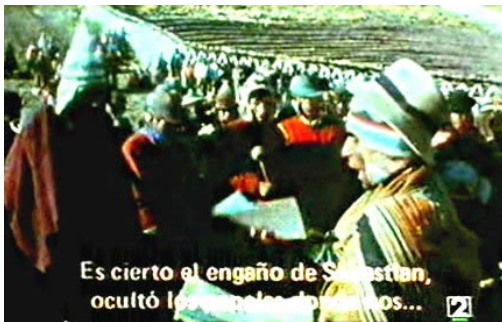
The handheld camera reframes and tracks in towards the speakers, as a man voices some of Sebastián's crimes.

Sebastián's family enters the fray.

composition in depth, deep focus and the long take in filmmakers such as Jean Renoir, Orson Welles and William Wyler, as well as in Italian neo-realists Roberto Rossellini, Vittorio de Sica and Luchino Visconti.[16b] In the work of these latter directors, there is a determination to do away with the effects of montage altogether, "to transfer to the screen the *continuum* of reality" (Bazin 1967: 37). This historical tendency in cinema, for Bazin, signalled

> "the regeneration of realism in storytelling and thus…[the capability] of bringing together real time, in which things exist, along with the duration of the action, for which classical editing had insidiously substituted mental and abstract time" (Bazin 1967: 39).

The realist aesthetic was seen as democratic in that its inherent ambiguity required the viewer to participate actively in the creation of meaning.

Some years before Sanjinés began experimenting with the sequence shot in *Jatun Auka* (1973), Jean-Luc Godard put the same device to a quite different use. Brian Henderson notes that in *Weekend* and *La chinoise* (both 1967), Godard uncouples the sequence shot from composition in depth: a combination that for Bazin was key to the realist aesthetic:

> "Godard's later style does require the active participation of the viewer, but not in Bazin's sense of choosing what to see within a multi-layered image […]. Godard presents instead an admittedly synthetic, single-layered construct, which the viewer must examine critically, accept or reject. The viewer is not drawn *into* the image, nor does he make choices within it; he stands outside the image and judges it *as a whole*. […] Through flatness of frame and transparency of action, he seeks to eliminate ambiguity" (Henderson 1970-1971: 4; original emphasis).

Henderson goes on to argue that in privileging flatness over composition in depth, Godard undoes the latter technique's projection of a

> "bourgeois world infinitely deep, rich, complex, ambiguous, mysterious. Godard's flat frames collapse this world into two-dimensional actuality" (1970-1971: 14).

Sanjinés' 1973 picture *Jatun Auka* has much in common with Godard's deconstructive modernism. Although it concentrates less on visual flatness than do Godard's cited works, the Peruvian film deflates narrative depth by other means, combining sequence shots with distancing techniques such as the use of an onscreen narrator that neutralizes narrative tension (García Pabón 2001).[17] The later movie *La nación clandestina*, and the theoretical apparatus erected around it, by contrast, would seem closer to Bazinian realism.

In rejecting the repressive nature of Western narrative, and in their consequent political imperative to reconstruct cinematic realism under a new law, by the late 1980s the Ukamau Group thus came back almost full circle to the Bazinian spatio-temporal unity that Burch had dismissed for its naïve, outmoded faith in the mimetic properties of film.[18] Sanjinés and his collaborators, though, go beyond Bazin's liberal-democratic celebration of spatio-temporal unity, which implies "a more active mental attitude on the part of the spectator and a more positive contribution on his part to the action in progress" (Bazin 1967: 35-36). In *La nación clandestina* the maintenance of spatial and temporal unity remains a firmly anti-colonial enterprise that not only is consistent with indigenous spatio-temporality, but *also* aims to opens up space for the viewer to link screen reality to

His mother is framed in close-up as she speaks. This is consistent with Sanjinés' ideas about filming Andean notions of time and space, since the close-up is just one part of a much longer sequence-shot that respects the spatial dynamics of the scene.

Sebastián is then expelled from the ayllu.

A cut to an extreme-long shot at extreme-high angle brings us to a bird's eye view of Sebastián's expulsion…

…and a slow pan right and tilt-up reveals this to be the point-of-view of the present-day Sebastián reflecting on his past crimes.

their own historical reality and to take political action in the present. Western narrative, on the other hand, "manipulates attention by closing down reflexive spaces and times" (Sanjinés 1989: 66). A (perhaps simplified) conception of indigenous narrative form merges into the type of militant spectatorship proposed in the heat of the New Latin American Cinema by the Argentine radicals Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, who put forward that

> "a film that is closed in on itself casts the viewer down into a passive, spectatorial role, with the option of approving or rejecting. A film that transmits experiences and knowledge that are *not yet concluded*, and that invites its audience to complete them and to critically question them, transforms the viewers into co-authors and live protagonists of the action." (Solanas and Getino 1973: 163-4)[19]

The "reflexive space" of the integral sequence shot, though, is far removed from the *self*-reflexivity of montage techniques and narrative disruption that both Sanjinés and other practitioners of the New Latin American Cinema had previously used. Writing on the more overtly militant 1960s and 1970s cinemas, Ana López traces an evolution from the earlier films and theoretical writings of the New Latin American Cinema, which held to "a naïve belief in the camera's ability to record 'truths' – to capture a national reality or essence without any mediation," to the later works in which

> "'Realism,' no longer seen as tied to simple perceptual truth or to a mimetic approximation of the real, was increasingly used to refer to a self-conscious material practice. The cinema's powers of representation – its ability to reproduce the surface of the lived world – were activated not as a record or duplication of that surface, but in order to explain it, to reveal its hidden aspects, to disclose the material matrix that determined it." (López 1990: 407-408)

Sanjinés' integral sequence shot holds just as much faith in cinema's capacity to document reality as does Bazin's notion of the reconciliation of real and dramatic time, and the two theorists share a belief in the complexity of cinematic reality's construction. The French critic celebrated deep space as a mode of conveying a spatio-temporal universe artificially constructed by the director and cameraman, who "have converted the screen into a dramatic checkerboard, planned down to the last detail" (Bazin 1967: 34). In the same way, Sanjinés recounts the complex camera maneuvers involved in achieving the integral sequence shot in *La nación clandestina* using dolly, crane and an agile crew, adding that each shot must be "rehearsed to perfection" (1989: 71). This was a great improvement on the Ukamau Group's previous attempts in *Jatun Auka* and *Lloksy Kaymanta!*, in which a lack of planning had hampered the actors' freedom of movement, creativity and improvisation. This limitation was only partly corrected in *La nación clandestina* by pre-filming on video the more spontaneous actions produced in rehearsal, and reconstructing them with precise direction upon filming (Sanjinés 1989: 69). Sanjinés, though, goes beyond Bazinian realism in justifying the formal reconstruction of reality as a vessel to express the broader philosophy of his protagonists. Sanjinés' camera is endowed here with the capacity to reflect, document and participate in an *already existing* material and cosmic reality, and is seen as an engine of potential social and political tranformation.

Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui latches onto this point when she comments that previous films such as *Jatun Auka* are "constructed from outside the story" in a naturalist manner, "*as if*" a transcultural understanding between Marxist guerrillas and indigenous peasants were possible (Rivera Cusicanqui 1990; original emphasis). *La nación clandestina*, on the other hand, uses *non*-naturalist techniques and "*re*constructs the lives of the inhabitants of Willkani'; "the fiction is managed [...] as a symbolic, archetypical representation of this reality" (Rivera Cusicanqui 1990; my emphasis). This again chimes strongly with Bazinian aesthetics in which, for Gilles Deleuze, "the real was no longer represented or reproduced but 'aimed at'" (1989: 1). Deleuze, writing on neo-realism in the *nouveau roman*, goes on to

A similar visual trope is used at the end of the film, when the camera films Sebastián's approaching funeral procession with a frontal shot,…

…integrates into the crowd as it passes by, bearing Sebastián's corpse…

…and comes to rest on Sebastián himself, bringing up the back of the procession, who stops to observe the cortège. In reflecting on his own death from beyond the grave, the figure of Sebastián comes to represent the idea that indigenous cultural identity is not a lifeless artifact, but a process to be activated in the political present.

paraphrase Alain Robbe-Grillet, who describes traditional realism as that which "presupposes the independence of its object" (in Rivera Cusicanqui's words, an object conceived "from outside"). Conversely neo-realist description, in Deleuze's summary of Robbe-Grillet,

> "*replaces* its own object, on the one hand it erases or *destroys* its reality which passes into the imaginary, but on the other hand it powerfully brings out all the reality which the imaginary or the mental *create* through speech and vision" (Deleuze 1989: 7; original emphasis).

A great deal of consonance can be found here with a later theoretical piece by Sanjinés, in which the director outlines his bid to "create a reality that is more real than the impression of reality that we live every day," by "fascinating the viewer, bewitching him with the magic of the images and sounds" (Sanjinés 1999: 34, 41). Here, Sanjinés condemns mainstream cinema not for its seductive use of film language per se but for its tendency to employ that language in the service of a "deceptive," formulaic and often violent view of reality. It is therefore the job of the scriptwriter (and by extension, one can assume, the director) to "capture" the viewer in a "hypnosis" deriving from a studied and "truthful" depiction of the world (Sanjinés 1999: 35).[20] Recognizing that the film is consonant with her own society's "internal rhythms," the viewer will naturally engage in a creative and poetic (rather than rational) determination to change, or to participate in the ongoing construction of, that reality:

> "A script, the spirit and soul of a film, can lay out the means whereby the true and profound dimensions of reality can be conveyed, transforming everyday life, reinventing it, deforming it, changing it, through a process, that is to say art, that goes beyond rational intelligence, that is closer to the power of intuition, so as to bring to us the true nature of things in a marvellous way…" (Sanjinés 1999: 34)

Para recibir el canto de los pájaros (1995) reflects upon the problems that Sanjinés and his crew had encountered during the filming of *Blood of the Condor* (1969), recounting the experiences of a film crew unable to convince members of an indigenous community to participate in their movie.

Sons of the Last Garden (2004) is a thriller set in both La Paz and a highland indigenous community, in which a group of urban youths are caught up in criminal activity, but are ultimately redeemed by learning indigenous values.

Looking down in extreme long shot, a child enters the building where Sebastián is putting on his costume for the dance.

The praxis of Andean realism: the flashback and the integral sequence shot

Upon release, *La nación clandestina* was not universally celebrated for successfully merging Andean temporality with film style. The poet Eduardo Nogales Guzmán (1990), for one, cast the Ukamau Group's movie as a violent imposition of European thought onto an entirely misunderstood Aymara reality, reading the film as a Foucauldian dissertation on medieval concepts of madness and redemption. Nogales Guzmán, along with other critics and participants in the contemporary Bolivian audiovisual sphere, have also seen a problematic purity of Andean values and structures of thought even in *La nación clandestina*, the most nuanced of Sanjinés' films in terms of its exploration of the transcultural relationships between indigenous and *mestizo* (mixed-race) Bolivian society.

The camera reframes down and right, and Sebastián, screen right in medium shot, explains to the curious children that he's putting bells on his legs.

The hand-held camera is virtually motionless. "You're Juanito? A nice name."

More smooth reframing as light falls onto Sebastián's dancing mask. "Why are you putting on these clothes?"

"I'm going out to dance now." Sebastián moves the large mask and headdress through the narrow opening as ...

... the camera tracks left under the next arch to frame another group of children passing by outside.

The headdress brushes past the camera in extreme close-up as he puts it through the passage and then comes out. The *altiplano* wind swirls on the soundtrack.

As Sebastián settles the mask on his head, the hand-held camera paces almost 180 degrees around his body…

... and we now see the arches at the back of the frame. The Jacha Tata Danzante pipe music tentatively punctuates the soundtrack, marking the onset of Sebastián's new role as ritual dancer.

He tries moving around and ...

... begins to dance, albeit stiffly, moving backwards away from the camera.

The camera tracks back slightly and tilts down to move a boy into the front of the frame. He admires the mask, as do…

… more onlookers, taken in by a long pan left. At least to these young inhabitants of the *ayllu*, Sebastián's personal identity has now been subsumed to that of the community. Here ends the sequence shot of some 80 seconds' duration.

The rights and wrongs of these arguments are beyond the scope of this essay. What interests me here is rather the way in which the integral sequence shot combines a (perhaps essentializing) notion of the nature of "the people's internal rhythms" with a *political* will to place the collective empathy deriving from the instinctive recognition of those rhythms at the service of social change. As I have outlined above, it does so by rejecting a Western realist narrative tradition that converts time and space into fragmented units of exchange, replacing it with what we might call an "Andean realism" that both idealizes and normalizes Aymara time.

The cinematography and editing of *La nación clandestina* spatially integrate "historical actors' into the topography of the *altiplano*:a technique much used throughout the Ukamau Group's films. In the same way, as I observed above, the

film's narrative structure knits Sebastián's personal journey into the wider, mythologized journeys of indigenous and national history in Bolivia. As Sebastián walks back to his *ayllu* Willkani, earlier episodes of his life are narrated via flashbacks, in which his personal experience as an acculturated Aymara cuts across recent Bolivian history. The Ukamau Group had already made wide use of flashbacks in *Yawar Mallku* (1969), but according to the group's own self-critique, that film's temporal structure responded to the rhetorical requirements of dramatic tension: a classical technique in which editing is employed to manipulate the plot's presentation of story time.

In *La nación clandestina*, the transitions between the narrative "present" and "past" are not marked by the fades or dissolves that would denote a temporal disruption in classical cinematic narrative. In classical cinema, flashbacks "are usually motivated as mental subjectivity, since the events we see are triggered by a character's recalling the past" (Bordwell and Thompson 2008: 91-92). However, Bordwell and Thompson explain, these moments of subjectivity are most commonly subordinated to an overarching *objective* narration. In Sanjinés' 1989 film, in contrast, the "past" sequences appear less as prompts that add historical depth and subjective insight to a narrative, objectively-narrated present. They exist rather on an even epistemological footing as the "present" scenes,[21][open endnotes in new window] as equal parts of a temporal sphere constructed around Sebastián's psyche, which in turn slips in and out of synch with the memorial time of his *ayllu*.

This formal strategy is foreshadowed in the opening sequence when Uncle Tankara, a village elder, proclaims that

> "our past comes back to the present. It is the present. We live in the past and present at the same time."

From its outset, then, the film lays out, in a schematic and didactic fashion, the multi-directional nature of Andean time that is to frame the Ukamau Group's aesthetic of national redemption in *La nación clandestina*. In Andean (Quechua and Aymara) thought, the categories that Western rationality separates out into "time" and "space" are encapsulated within the broader cosmic category of *pacha*. [22] Accordingly, in *La nación clandestina*, the temporal device of the flashback is deeply linked to the spatial implications of the "integral" sequence shot.

After Sebastián has been discovered embezzling North American aid money as community leader, the six-minute sequence from his capture, through the community meeting and up to his final expulsion, contains just three cuts. Actors, cinematographer and editor use space through 360 degrees. After Sebastián is rounded up the camera spins right round on its axis to establish a new plane of action as it accommodates the gathering crowd. The hand-held camera hovers at the edge of the group of villagers as Sebastián is dragged to the front, remaining in long-shot as various speakers move forwards from various angles to air their views. The camera paces around the edge of the group and crosses the centre circle as the speakers shuffle in and out of shot. It approaches one speaker to move him into medium close-up at the right-hand edge of the screen, with Sebastián standing at the opposite edge. The rest of the screen is filled by the crowd, which looms in the background but occupies centre-stage and is clearly visible in deep focus. As the villagers argue over the traitor's fate the hand-held camera establishes its point of view behind the speakers. But a cutaway to Sebastián's wife, mother and brother joining the meeting flips the plane yet again to the opposite side of the axis, opening up a further field of space to reveal yet more villagers looking on in the distance. The camera integrates itself into the crowd to the extent that it appears to encompass *all* the available space.

There is no deconstructive suggestion here of a "lacking" or absent off-screen space or time; there is no possibility for a narrative "outside" of the action we are shown. Unlike the distancing effects used in some of the Ukamau Group's previous films, *La nación clandestina* is seeped in the mythologized idea of Andean spatio-

2. The dance continues.

This is an important transitional sequence shot that gives a detailed view of fellow *ayllu* members joining and following Sebastián's dance, denoting his eventual acceptance back into the community. Framing is through relatively tightly framed full and medium shots. Some dancers wear masks typical of many Andean celebrations, white faces that parodically mimic Spanish colonialists. It becomes clear here that the pipe music, now dominating the soundtrack along with the sound of percussion instruments, is diegetic.

temporality as a permanent, immutable cycle: a notion that bleeds into the film's formal structure. The spatial dynamics of the integral sequence shot described above, in which the unseen (offscreen space) is constantly re-integrated into the frame, can in turn be read as a metaphor for the management of time in the film's plot as a whole. Time is constantly reframed throughout *La nación clandestina* in order to incorporate both Sebastián's personal perceptions of history, as an urbanized Aymara striving to recuperate the values and memory of his *ayllu*, and the great events of national time.

The point here, though, is not that this spatial and temporal integrity is static, discrete and holistic. Rather, the community's progression towards the future depends on a simultaneous and redemptive return to a past, following the Andean sense of *nayrapacha* (discussed above). Sanjinés draws here on the common cinematic figure of the returning exile who redeems both himself and his homeland through a renewed connection with his origins. *La nación clandestina*, though, does not seek to dislocate or interrogate the yearning for the homeland in the style of many of the "accented" filmmakers discussed in Hamid Naficy's (2001) study of exilic, diasporic and "ethnic" cinemas. Rather, Sebastián's ultimate rediscovery of a forgotten ancestral dance is to be conceived as a symbolic and political act of progress: indeed, the trope of Sebastián's recuperation of the Jacha Tata Danzante itself stands as a narrative metaphor of the entire film's spatio-temporal dynamic. The integral sequence shot thus reflects the notion that lived time is both historically unchanging and integral, *and* engages with ongoing processes of social upheaval.

Sebastián is now flanked by his fellow *ayllu* members as his dance gathers pace.

The camera edges backwards to bring more villagers into view, giving us an impression of the scale of the parade.

As the figures approach us they are framed more tightly…

… and their *ruanas* swirl by in extreme close-up as they move on past. The camera has now nearly come to rest in the midst of the parade, slightly reframing down and left to bring the remaining villagers into view.

A group of spectators come last, mostly women and children. The pipe and percussion music fades into the background…

… and competes once more with the swirling wind, as the dog brings up the rear.

The camera swiftly pans right as they leave the village, set against the austere scenery and harshly contrasting colours of the altiplano landscape. The sequence shot ends after just under a minute.

A cut creates a temporal ellipsis, moving our perspective to an extreme-high angle, a bird's eye view, with the dance continuing in the valley below. The camera pulls further and further back, first bringing into view additional villagers looking on…

… and then converting them into barely-perceptible specks on the majestic Andean landscape.

If *La nación clandestina* in some respect narrates the clash between indigenous and non-indigenous histories, the Andean conception of history as a cyclical repetition of an organic process (rather than a Western march towards national progress) is embodied in one of the film's visual motifs. As Sebastián is ousted from the *ayllu*, a high-angle extreme long-shot frames him from a mountain ridge, being carried slowly on the back of a donkey across the vast altiplano below. A steep tilt up reveals that it is from Sebastián's point-of-view (in the present, journeying back to Willkani) that we have been observing this scene. Many of the film's "flashbacks" end with a similar shot, and it becomes clear that Sebastián's personal past exists within his own present as he undergoes the long process of atoning for his wrongdoings.[23] In *La nación clandestina*'s final sequence, though, individual identification is cast onto the broader plane of a communal, trans-historical indigenous consciousness.

After his performance of the Jacha Tata Danzante brings Sebastián's death, his

funeral procession is framed in a slow, baleful extreme-long-shot before a closer shot then pans and tracks across the mourners as they walk past. The camera comes to rest on the last mourner in the group: Sebastián himself. He stops and watches the ceremony proceed; the frame freezes in medium-close-up and the credits roll. In observing his own funeral Sebastián completes his personal journey of self-consciousness, of realising his individual role both as a vessel of indigenous cultural memory and as an agent of Bolivia's national renewal. Executive producer Beatriz Palacios found that this message struck a chord among viewers at the film's premiere in Sucre (Gamboa 1999: 241). But in transcending the narrative "now" of his lifetime, Sebastián also acts as an organic spiritual presence informing and renewing the cultural *and political* memory of his community.

The film's abiding image, I would argue, is not so much that of Sebastián perishing just as his *compañeros* return from their concrete political struggle alongside the miners, but rather that of them bearing aloft Sebastián's corpse which comes to embody the reactivation of Willkani's collective oral, visual and ritual memory. On a broader allegorical level, Sebastián can be taken here as an incarnation of the new national subject that might offer an alternative to Bolivia's slide into neoliberalism.[24] Given that the integrationist revolutionary nationalism of the post-1952 era had been falling into obsolescence for some years by the time of *La nación clandestina*'s release, Sebastián's cultural renewal of his Aymara community seeks not so much to renew the MNR's co-optation of the indigenous for the national project, but rather to re-align the national project along the lines of Aymara culture.

La nación clandestina's integration of Andean thought into film form, of course, has its limitations. We might reasonably object that the entire theoretical basis of the integral sequence shot derives from a reworking of realist cinematic aesthetics that foreground visuality: an originary property of both cinema and photography that is steeped in a colonial logic of surveillance and control (Schiwy 2009: 87-90). If reality is to be "aimed at," in Bazinian fashion, the film in some ways does not quite get there, in the same way that Sebastián himself can watch from a distance, but no longer participate in, the material progress of his community. The indigenous appropriation of visual technology would thus seem to be incomplete. The space that separates Sebastián from the ongoing struggle that his *compañeros* conduct at the end of the film is analogous to the space that separates the symbolic or metaphorical realist aesthetic from the reality it documents.

Andean structures of thought and social struggle, then, do not entirely permeate film form in *La nación clandestina*. Rather, the indigenous presence is used strategically and didactically in order to signal an alternative path for Bolivian nationhood as a whole: a theme mantained in the Ukamau Group's two later works *Para recibir el canto de los pájaros* (1995) and *Los hijos del último jardín* (2004). After all, the essay "El plano secuencia integral," which I have discussed at length here, emphasizes from the outset that the Ukamau Group's cinema is no longer mainly for the consumption of Andean indigenous peasants. It is equally intended to open the eyes of Europeanized highland *mestizos* for whom "centuries of Aymara and Quechua thought have infiltrated their being in spite of their own racism" (Sanjinés 1989: 65).[25] Yet *La nación clandestina*'s failure to envisage currents of thought that decenter the question of the national altogether, means that the film's stance of national redemption has in some senses been rendered outdated as a critical discourse.

The fact that *La nación clandestina* works precisely on the level of nationality leaves it open to the critique of masculinist national redemption voiced by Geidel in relation to *Yawar Mallku* and cited above. Geidel argues that a similar patriarchal mode of "nationalist redistributive politics" is currently embraced by the government of the Aymara president and former *cocalero* leader Evo Morales, and contrasts it to contemporary "post-statist feminist scholars," who consider the issue of territory in conjunction with that of female and indigenous autonomy (Geidel 2010: 782-783). Despite coming to power in 2006 thanks to a great extent

to popular mobilization, Morales' subsequent government has attracted criticism for marginalizing the decolonizing logic of *pachakuti*, and for allowing a destructive "*mestizo* mediation" to frame indigenous struggle within an instrumental and centralizing vision of national rebuilding (Rivera Cusicanqui 2011: 72).[26]

Even so, *La nación clandestina* remains of great interest both in terms of aesthetic accomplishment and as a provocative political statement that challenged the guiding logic of mainstream politics of its day, proposing an "indianizing" of the public sphere even as Bolivia forged its new model of (neo)liberal, "pluricultural" democracy. It remains, though, far more than a statement of political intent. Still regarded by many as one of the best films ever produced in Bolivia, it stands as a film that asks the viewer how far he or she is able to identify, on both a rational and an emotional level, with Sebastián's voyage in which collective history, indigenous struggle and subjective identity are closely intertwined.

Go to notes page

Notes

1. All translations from Spanish-language sources are my own unless stated otherwise. []

2. Most of the Ukamau Group's films, from Sanjinés' debut feature *Ukamau* (And So It Is, 1966) to his most recent picture *Los hijos del último jardín* (The Sons of the Last Garden, 2004) are spoken mainly or wholly in Quechua and/or Aymara. Eastern, lowland Bolivia, with a much lower proportion of indigenous inhabitants, features little in Sanjinés' films and writings. Sanjinés' earlier independent short *Revolución* (Revolution, 1963) has no direct sound; in his subsequent short *Aysa!* (Landslide, 1965), only a single word is spoken: the Quechua "Aysa" of the title.

3. For a thorough account of the background, politics and repercussions of the MNR regime, see Dunkerley (1984).

4. From 1964-1982 Bolivia had 13 presidents, the longest-standing of whom were René Barrientos (1964-1969) and Hugo Bánzer (1971-1978).

5. Although the Peace Corps promoted the U.S. government's agenda of birth control in Bolivia, little concrete evidence has been found that it conducted enforced sterilisation of indigenous women: an issue that interested Sanjinés in a metaphorical more than a literal sense (Siekmeier 2000). I analyze most of the Ukamau Group's films in depth in my doctoral thesis (Wood 2005).

6. Himpele (2008: 183) notes that in *La tribunal libre* (and by extension in Condepa's politics), "just as the popular classes themselves felt abandoned or marginalized by the promises of the paternalist nation-state that had dominated the twentieth century [Palenque's] voice recuperated desire toward the fantasy he conducted of a prosperous popular nation-state." On the strong bargaining power that Condepa obtained following the 1989 elections, see Himpele (2008: 142-143).

7. For an analysis of *La nación clandestina* in relation to nationality and to the intellectual and literary currents of indigenism to which it refers, see García Pabón (2001).

8. It does not seem coincidental that the name of Sebastián's *ayllu* evokes that of 19th-century Aymara leader Pablo Zárate Willka.

9. It was during Barrientos' presidency, in October 1967, that guerrilla leader Che Guevara was captured and killed at Ñancahuazú in south-eastern Bolivia.

10. Rivera Cusicanqui (1991: 45) points out that "*nayra* means ancient, in the past, but also eye, or vision."

11. Schiwy studies the work of CEFREC (Centre for Cinematographic Training and Production), established in La Paz in 1989 by Iván Sanjinés, son of Jorge. CEFREC has offered workshops at rural locations across Bolivia for indigenous media practitioners since 1996. According to the website of the National Indigenous Plan for Audiovisual Communication, which is coordinated by CEFREC and CAIB (Indigenous Audiovisual Coordinating Body of Bolivia), in its first ten years the Plan trained over 300 indigenous communicators who produced more than 400 videos of various genres as well as regular television and radio programmes; see www.sistemadecomunicacionindigena.org/inf/PlanNacional.aspx (consulted 27 June 2012).

12. For Mariátegui (1975: 60-65), the regime of collective ownership and labour in pre-Hispanic Inca society formed the basis of an agrarian communism that was analogous, although different in form, to Marx's concept of communism in industrialized societies. In his critique of Mariátegui, Juan Carlos Grijalva (2010: 325-326) notes that the Peruvian thinker relies on a nostalgic and idealized concept of Inca society and that his vision of social change "still believed in the 'ontological centrality' of a revolutionary subject, the Indian, who represented a homogenous and single political entity that would transform history through revolution." Sanjinés openly acknowledges Mariátegiu's intellectual influence on his filmmaking practice.

13. Pérez is director of photography of Sanjinés' three most recent features *La nación clandestina*, *Para recibir el canto de los pájaros* (To Hear the Birds Singing, 1995) and *Los hijos del último jardín* (2004). [return to page 2]

14. Burch's *Theory of Film Practice*, a compilation of texts previously published in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, both builds on and diverges from existing intellectual currents in French and European film theory and criticism and in critical and political theory more broadly. See Annette Michelson's introduction to *Theory of Film Practice* (Burch 1973: v-xv) on Burch's renewed appeal to the modernist tradition, against André Bazin's antimodernist celebration of democratic realism in the cinema. On Burch's debt of gratitude, in defining the "zero point of cinematic style," both to Eisenstein and to Bertolt Brecht's notion of theatrical identification, see Burch's own introduction to the English-language edition of his book (1973: vi-xx). On the various ways in which Burch's IMR builds on the work of Jean-Louis Baudry, Umberto Eco, Louis Althusser, Roland Barthes and others, see Rodowick (1988: 111-125).

15. For Sanjinés' own self-critique of the cultural misunderstandings implied in the methodological and grammatical approach of *Yawar Mallku*, and on the Ukamau Group's subsequent attempts to overcome such cultural barriers between themselves and highland indigenous communities by altering their own filmmaking praxis, see his essay "La experiencia boliviana" (Sanjinés and Grupo Ukamau 1979: 13-33).

16. The 1979 book was translated into English in 1989 as *Theory and Practice of a Cinema with the People* (Sanjinés and Grupo Ukamau 1989).

16b. On the links between Italian neo-realism and the Ukamau Group's film *Yawar Mallku* (1969), see Hess (1993).

17. According to Sanjinés, the narrator in *Jatun Auka* follows the tradition of the storyteller in Andean popular culture, who provides a synthesis of the story before narrating the details, thereby eliminating suspense (Sanjinés and Grupo Ukamau, 1979: 111).

18. See Annette Michelson's introduction, cited above, in Burch (1973: v-xv).

19. Solanas and Getino's clandestine, tripartate film-manifesto *La hora de los hornos* (The Hour of the Furnaces, 1968) was conceived along just these lines, not as a finished and self-contained product after the fashion of mainstream cinema, but as a trigger for debate in which the spectator completed the film's "meaning." Most militant Latin American filmmakers of the era shared a similar notion of film spectatorship as active process rather than passive voyeurism. Sanjinés held and maintains a strong conviction that his films should be viewed and debated collectively.

20. For Sanjinés, quoting formalist critic Rudolf Arnheim, the films of the New Latin American cinema that retained their relevance over the years were those that "bewitched through their art, through the direct impact of sounds and moving forms, and not through their discourse" (Jorge Sanjinés 1999: 40). The fact that the Bolivian director quotes Arnheim here shows that his faith in abstractionism that characterized his first feature *Ukamau* is still very much alive; see Wood (2006).

21. The undermining of the classical relations between objectivity and subjectivity in cinematic narrative is in itself by no means an original technique: Bordwell and Thompson go on to cite examples by Fellini, Buñuel, Haneke, Resnais and Nolan that similarly present alternative narrative modes. [return to page 3]

22. For an attempt to render the polysemous Aymara and Quechua term *pacha* into a Spanish/Latinate framework, see Estermann (2006: 155-158). As an adjective *pacha* can mean "inside"; as an adverb, "immediately" or "same"; as a suffix, "all" or "whole." As a noun it can encompass the notions "earth," "world," and "time." As Estermann explains, "*Pacha* could also be a homomorphic equivalent of the Latin term *esse* ('to be'): *pacha* is 'what is,' all that exists in the universe, 'reality.' It is an expression that refers to what is beyond the division between the visible and the invisible, the material and the immaterial, the earthly and the celestial, the profane and the sacred, the external and the internal" (2006: 157). For an explanation of the grammatical complexities of Andean notions of time, see Estermann (2006: 195-206).

23. Hanlon (2010) reads the use of the sequence shot in *La nación clandestina*, and specifically its role in uniting distinct temporalities as discussed here, as an adaptation of techniques used in Theodoros Angelopoulos' *The Travelling Players* (1974).

24. As García Pabón (2001) has aptly observed regarding this scene, "what is buried is the impossibility of being Indian and being Bolivian at the same time. [...] For the filmmaker, the only possible form of Bolivian nationality now is one of imagining the nation within the framework of Indian community values, within the framework of moral and cultural relations that the indigenous groups can propose to the Bolivian community."

25. The *criollo* dwellers of the lowland Santa Cruz region, "unmixed descendants of the Spanish colonizer, isolated by the green wall of the rainforest from the Andean region,"(Sanjinés 1989: 65) appear to be excluded from this new "national" vision. It is interesting that, although Sanjinés here critiques the Europeanized Bolivian intelligentsia with a broad brush, his own characterization of the inhabitants of different regions of Bolivia according to topographical regional features taps into a long tradition of Bolivian thought linking landscape with national and regional traits; see Sanjinés C. (2004: 66-106).

26. Again, the rights and wrongs of such critiques of Morales' government are beyond the scope of this essay. The ideological proximity between Sanjinés and Morales is illustrated by the president's recent decision to personally announce the impending premiere of Sanjinés' latest film *Insurgente*s, which he had viewed in a pre-screening: "Evo anuncia estreno del filme de Jorge Sanjinés," *PaginaSiete.bo*, 19 April 2012. Available online at www.paginasiete.bo/2012-04-20/Cultura/Destacados/29Cul02200412.aspx (accessed 29 June 2012).

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The impossibility of *mestizaje* in *The Hidden Nation*: emblematic constructions in the cinema of Jorge Sanjinés

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translated with explanatory notes
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Translator's introduction

Bolivia's ethnic and cultural configuration is unique in South America; the country's substantial indigenous presence is divided among several peoples. Of these the Aymara, based in western Bolivia in and around the area of La Paz, are among the most numerous. Urban migration is a particularly influential factor in ethnic and cultural identification, which varies according to social and political circumstances. The phenomenon of mestizaje, or ethnic and cultural mixing, has been a controversial issue ever since the Spanish conquest, as the stigma of backwardness attached to indigenous identity fluctuates and gradually diminishes.

Author's abstract: In this article the author analyzes the critical representation of *mestizaje* as presented by Bolivian film director Jorge Sanjinés in his film *The Hidden Nation* (1989). He claims that the film, which fundamentally expresses concern for the construction of the Bolivian nation, represents *mestizaje* — as a social category — as outmoded, essentially an impossibility. Sanjinés' film rather shows a nation founded on an "Andean essence" that the filmmaker seeks to reinforce, not only through the film's plot but also through the narrative models that he applies, which confirm his political and ideological position.

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In the work of the filmmaker Jorge Sanjinés, already celebrated in Bolivian

and Latin American cinema, the most profound sociocultural problems occupy a fundamental place. From Sanjinés onwards, Bolivian cinema has not only experimented with alternative narrative models, but also (which is crucial) has marked a phase — ephemeral, certainly — of "a cinema alongside the people" that finds its most immediate expression in the indigenous cultures of Bolivia. These preoccupations are set forth, perhaps in a more precise manner, in his film *The Hidden Nation*, (1989) in which Sanjinés offers a suggestive reflection on the Bolivian cultural nation. This work is centered, precisely, on the basic crux of the film: criticism of the idealized *mestizaje* constructed in and for the Bolivian sphere in the early 20th century, to be strongly exalted and diffused by the "revolutionary nationalism" of the middle of the same century. Sanjinés' film, among other media approaches, has revealed the cultural limits of a homogenizing *mestizaje* whilst showing us another form of projecting the Bolivian social dynamic. Hence there's a need — although this doubtless stems from an ideological perspective — to understand the forms of representation and interpretation of the national problem that cinema can reveal to us.

In contrast with the existing bibliography on analysing the film (see García 1998), here I postulate that *mestizaje* in *The Hidden Nation* is an outmoded impossibility and affirm, on the contrary, this "Andean essence" in the construction of the Bolivian cultural nation. Thus it is understood that Sanjinés' final proposal with regard to the construction of an "organic nation" — as the filmmaker has indicated — is founded on an indigenous subject rather than an indigenous/mestizo one. We will examine, then, this alternative means of setting forth the "national problem" through a film which, despite a distance of almost 20 years since its release, reflects some problems that have a bearing on Bolivia's present sociocultural situation.

1. A panorama of Sanjinés' cinema

In a talk given at the Universidad Mayor de San Andrés in September 1995, Jorge Sanjinés underlined cinema's "exploratory possibility" in the knowledge of human society. Here, the central features of his filmography are transparent, namely a preoccupation for the "backgrounds" of Andean indigenous culture, the construction of alternative aesthetic forms of representation, and continuity in the underlying political-ideological situation. These parameters have articulated Sanjinés' extensive work (1962-2004)[1] [open endnotes in new window] with slight variations. In this discourse, similarly, the filmmaker emphasized a central concern of his cinema: the positioning of indigenous people and culture in the possible constitution of an "organic nation." Sanjinés said on this occasion:

> "We have been very much concerned with investigation, through cinema, into the background of our people's soul. Even when we made denunciation films, which totally opposed the dominant system, we sought to approach what we called the country's "internal rhythms." We built a language based on a way of composing and organizing reality that is peculiar to our Andean world, because we are sure that if our society is one day going to make up an organic nation, it will be from assimilation

and development of its Andean essence, of its identity, incorporating everything positive that modernity offers us." (Sanjinés 1996: 74).

This problematic, regarding the position of the Andean world in the construction of the "organic nation" that Sanjinés deals with here, is the chief preoccupation of *The Hidden Nation* (1989). Through this film the filmmaker reflects counter-discursively, not only on the indigenous Andean identity conflict, but also on the sociocultural structure of the nation. But before going into this subject we will add a few lines on Sanjinés' cinema as a way of reminding ourselves of its guiding principles.

Sanjinés' cinema is anything but homogeneous: form, in his film writing and the political-ideological posture that accompanies it, varies slightly — without any implicit rupture — between *Ukamau* (*And So It Is*: 1966) and *The Children of the Last Garden* (2004). Two clearly-marked phases can be distinguished in his production, as the filmmaker has pointed out. Sanjinés explains this as follows:

> "The first, lasting until 1978 — when democracy was restored in Bolivia — had denunciation as its axis. *Blood of the Condor*, *The Courage of the People, Get out of Here*, and *The Principal Enemy*, among other productions, were situated within this framework, at a moment when critical spaces were very closed and almost nonexistent."

Later I was able to dedicate myself to themes from a more reflective viewpoint. *The Hidden Nation* served to analyze, for example, the theme of cultural identity, and *To Receive the Birds' Song* touched on the complex problem of racism and discrimination" (quoted in Ferrari 2003: 5).

These two axes — "denunciation" on the one hand, and "reflection" on the other — are, then, the frameworks that differentiate the cinema of "political radicalization" and Sanjinés' cinema of "construction-proposal." Here, of course, it is in the light of historical circumstances that Sanjinés' narrative acquires contrasts, evidently without losing its political-ideological and aesthetic direction.[2]

2. "Circularity" of uprooting and return

In *The Hidden Nation* the plot's tension alternates between uprooting and return, through the trajectory of its protagonist. Sebastián Mamani, as a child, abandons his Aymara community (*Willkani*) to face a chastening experience in La Paz. In this city his marginality leads him into certain apparent transformations in order to deny his indigenous condition. For example, he changes his surname from Mamani to Maisman. This apparent alteration, though, does not modify his sociocultural condition. In his keenness to integrate (camouflage) into the ranks of the citizenry he also adjusts to the repressive dominant regime by becoming a soldier. However, his position as an indigenous person — one he always attempts to deny — repeatedly underlines the cultural marginality that makes his life a

torment. Perhaps for this reason his stay in the city is not definitive; after this adverse experience of marginality and racism, Sebastián returns to Willkani. There, on the margins — he is practically a foreigner — he is named *jilakata* [local authority]. His political leadership, however, distances itself from the community conception of the exercise of power; on the contrary, his decisions are unilateral and only satisfy his own personal interests. As punishment Sebastián is judged, threatened and obliged to abandon the community.

Upon his return to the city, Sebastián resolves to (re)affirm his indigenous belonging through the execution of the "*Jacha Tata Danzante,*" a dance which constitutes a ritual act executed until the performer dies of exhaustion. The protagonist, carrying an ancestral mask, returns to his community to put an end to his erroneous conduct with the memory of this dance, latent since his infancy. Thus the "rebirth" of his identity is figured in Sebastián's contemplation at the (very) moment of his burial.

The Hidden Nation, as such, narrates the story of Sebastián's conflictive identity from the relationship between the indigenous world and the sociocultural spaces of this city. Thus the emblem of cultural identity — a highly complex matter — articulates the narrative of the film.

3. A little theory

Before going into the film's perspective on *mestizaje*, we will prepare the terrain with a few indispensable reflections on this theme and its labyrinthine configurations.

The terms "*mestizo*" and "*cholo,*"[3] intimately linked in their origins, are products of complex sociocultural and racial relations constructed during and since the colonial era. This complexity, as Javier Sanjinés (1996) points out, make it impossible for *mestizos* and *cholos* to be defined exclusively in terms of race, class, ethnicity or geographical location. The ambiguities and imprecisions are expressed not only because the terminology comes out of a complex historical process loaded with subjective valuations but also, fundamentally, "because one forgets that language marks and conceals the differences and subordinations of a concrete social stratification that implies that the terminology and the discourse of '*mestizaje*' are indisputably ideological." (Barragán 1992: 17).[4] Indeed such categorizations, a legacy of the colonial past, conceal and reinforce the power relations founded on the opposition between the Creole-white and the *cholo*-Indian.[5]

In the Bolivian sphere, as Javier Sanjinés proposes, *mestizaje* has been built since the early 20th century (after a negative vision of what this term implies at the end of the 19th century) "as a power discourse," above all with the revolution of 1952, whose identity proposal leant heavily on *mestizaje*. This means that through a discourse on the national, a homogeneous trawl through *mestizaje* was brought about in a bid to dissolve the profoundly differentiated character of Bolivian social stratification.[6] These ideas, similarly established in the official discourse

of neoliberalism, were attempts by Bolivian reality to "sublimate" and exalt *mestizaje* as a synthesis of reality, thus overcoming Bolivia's social and cultural diversity (Sanjinés 2005).

On the other hand, *mestizaje* is also a cultural fact (at times confusedly seen as a social category) that, far from being a molded structure, rather presents varying contours. According to this logic *mestizaje* is associated fundamentally with the processes of social and cultural mobility from indigenous groups to urban spheres. Here, certainly, there is a tendency towards a static conception, indicating that any change in what is considered indigenous tends towards *mestizaje*; however, these theoretical lines — it seems to me — indicate the 'origin' of the processes of cultural *mestizaje*.

In this same direction, these cultural processes also interweave with so-called '*cholification*' (seen as a Bolivianized form of *mestizaje*) which would seem, in our view, to be the most pertinent means of analysis, since this term seeks to explain the cultural changes undergone by indigenous people in urban centers. Nevertheless, this term is little-defined and is evoked almost always in a pejorative way. For this reason, for the particular ends of this analysis, I prefer the term *mestizaje*, considered as the result of cultural interweaving that emerges through the superposition of Andean and western elements but constructed in a complex manner, giving rise to a series of categorizations such as '*cholo*', 'acculturated Indian' '*chola*', '*chota'* [7] etc., which foreshadow ideological charges and reinforce the strict hierarchy of Bolivian society.

Having made these notes, then, we can return to a reflection on the work of Jorge Sanjinés which will permit us to specify these generalizations upon the particular case of his protagonist.

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4. Emblems of the process of *mestizaje*

> "For some time now Sebastián has been breaking my heart because, when living in the city, he changed his surname [...] Since then he has been ashamed of us [...]."

With these words, uttered in Aymara and in a pained sob, Sebastián's mother opens the film. The background to this expression shows that Sebastián's distancing from his community marks the characteristics of the image of the 'acculturated Indian'. It is not, however, the simple displacement from countryside to city that defines this image of Sebastián. Beyond this duality is a rupture with the "Andean essence" which makes possible the constitution of this cultural condition. In other words, we might say that the image of the "mestizo" or rather "*cholo*" germinates from the cultural negation that Sebastián seeks in the city in attempting to move away, without any great success, from his original condition.

For this reason, the film's perspective leads us to think that the city operates as a mechanism in the process of *mestizaje*. All the same, the errant condition of Sebastián incarnates the socio-cultural prejudices associated with the figure of the "Latinized Indian" which accentuate a difference from the indigenous. Hence the community's perception of Sebastián becomes conflictive in relation to his non-indigenous attributes. Hence relations between Sebastián and the community, despite its partial acceptance of him as a political authority, are expressed in terms of rejection.

In this way reference to "the process of *mestizaje*" is constructed not in relation to a biological synthesis but according to a countryside-city social mobility that forms, then defines, Sebastián's errant condition. This is clarified — I insist — with Sebastián's negative self-onslaught regarding his condition as a native Bolivian. The perception, it seems, that the indigenous villagers themselves have of Sebastián could be better expressed with the term "acculturated Indian." But besides this, the negative view from below (from the community) is constructed above all in relation to the "Latinized profile" of the protagonist. Betrayal, servility, and personal benefit at the cost of the community are among the elements that cause Sebastián's relationship with the community to become tense when he is named *jilakata*: thus his rejection and expulsion from the community is a product of the protagonist's Latinized exteriorization.

Definitively the city-countryside relationship expresses, in terms of a cultural counter-position, the tension in Sebastián's identity. Let's say,

then, that the concrete sense of cultural estrangement does not emerge from mere displacement from countryside to city, but rather that it is constructed both as a negation-rupture of the indigenous and as a permanent desire to assimilate to the city's "otherness." Hence the appropriation of linguistic elements, clothing and non-indigenous experiences are decisive in this characterization. These elements show with some clarity the cultural displacement of the "Indian condition" towards *mestizaje*.[8] [open endnotes in new window]

5. Marginal image of the *mestizo*

In "Indigenism and National Subjects in the Cinema of Jorge Sanjinés" (1998) Leonardo García Pabón underlines that, in *The Hidden Nation*, Sanjinés proposes the constitution of a "national subject" through his protagonist, Sebastián. Sebastián's "errant condition" permits Sanjinés — according to García — to approach "social spaces and national institutions" (the army, for example). For that reason, the critic maintains, Sebastián's identity at the end of the film is the "result of a series of identities" formed inside these spaces. From this configuration, then, emerges a subject that is not only indigenous but, fundamentally, national. In other words, the "new national subject" in the broadest sense is the consequence of the experience that Sebastián has forged, both with the values of his Andean culture and with those values that he has assimilated in "national spaces" (García 1998: 258-260).

I believe that Sanjinés, in proposing a "national subject" in this film through Sebastián, does so by privileging the Andean experience and by rather negating that experience constructed in his "errant condition." It is evident that at the end of the film the superseding (preceded by negation) of Sebastián's "acculturated condition" is made concrete, thus giving way to the "indigenous subject." The metaphorical elements of this operation (overcoming-negating) are quite eloquent. Thus the protagonist's death is the fundamental fact of this transition. It is not a case, then, of a senseless death; on the contrary, death symbolizes the circular conception of Andean time, as well as the beginning of a new existence, or rather of a rebirth. That death-birth is articulated as such in the dance of the "*Jacha Tata Danzante*" which requires a sense of the Andean in memorizing an almost forgotten past. Only by means of this ritual, in a background of collective meaning, can the "errant" Sebastián again become a part of his community. Sebastián's appearance, then, at the moment of his burial, announces a profoundly Andean rebirth. In this way the Sebastián of betrayal, of deceit, of lying, is entombed by the Sebastián who has returned to his cultural roots.[9]

The considered image of the "acculturated Indian" dissolves, as a consequence, into the accepted canons of the indigenous. In this way the affirmation of the "integral subject" is the negation of the "acculturated Indian"; the new Sebastián, profoundly Andean, is imposed upon the uprooted Sebastián. All in all, it is the negation of the "errant subject" that makes possible the configuration of the new indigenous subject. It gives the impression, however, that this negation is not a mere systemic rupture

since Sebastián's experience, forged in the "national spaces," allows construction and projection of the (re)affirmed profound indigenous subject. Be this as it may, the experience of acculturation vanishes at the end of the film, instead acquiring a completely negative character.

6. Circular aesthetic: under the Andean gaze

The plot of the film is constructed with filmic resources from Sanjinés' own cinema. On the aesthetic plane two specific elements can be noted: firstly, the reappearance of the individual protagonist (Sebastián) in contrast with the representation of the collective protagonist (people/community) in his previous films and, secondly, the consolidation of the "all-encompassing sequence shot" which develops from *The Principal Enemy* onwards. This opting for the individual protagonist, as a narrative strategy, centers the problematic tension on Sebastián. If the idea of the "collective character-author" of his previous films represented community (collective) conflicts, now this tension is manifested according to the dilemmas within the indigenous subject. For this reason the reflection on cultural identity in Sebastián is the nucleus that articulates this representation. The turn towards the individual protagonist does not imply in any way a rupture with Sanjinés' political-ideological focus: the preoccupation with the background of indigenous peoples acquires a more specific dimension in *The Hidden Nation*.

The use of the "all-encompassing sequence shot" is the narrative resource that allows Sanjinés to structure the film's storyline according to the Andean circular conception of time. It reflects, as such, the "visual perception" that indigenous cultures have of the world. Sanjinés says in this regard:

> "The 'all-encompassing sequence shot' as I call it (which is a long shot that takes in a whole scene-sequence in which there are no cuts; in which there are no breaks; in which the movements of camera and actors interweave; in which it is possible to include all possible shots, from a close-up to a long shot) responds to an idea of circular time in the Andean world, which is distinct from western linear time and which, on the other hand, is expressing the feeling of integration, of collectivity, particular to the Andean people" (quoted in Bajo 2003).

The Hidden Nation, as Sanjinés underlines, is a film of "100 sequences and 100 shots" which "captures the spectator, wraps him up, traps him within it but allows him to think, carries him along in aesthetic enjoyment, in reflection" (quoted in Bajo 2003: undated). Hence the "all-encompassing sequence shot" also constitutes the filmmaker's profound affirmation of Andean cultures. Now, within these profoundly indigenist/Andeanist guidelines, we should ask ourselves — perhaps at the risk of 'over-interpreting' and being too radical — whether or not Sanjinés' films fall into a kind of 'aesthetic *mestizaje*,' since cinema originates in the western world. In other words, the thematic and aesthetic elements with which the

filmmaker works, if they correspond principally to the Andean cultures of Bolivia, nonetheless elude all the models associated with this so very western invention. This, of course, is nothing if not a product of the strange and ambivalent modernity that Sanjinés, it should be pointed out, professes to recognize.

7. Disenchantment with the idealized mestizo

In a dialogue concerning *The Courage of the People*, Fernando Calderón and Javier Sanjinés reflect that the cinema of Jorge Sanjinés produces a "rupture with the verticality of aesthetic resources" constructed under the aegis of the lettered.[10] This new process, for which the authors use the term "de-sublimation of reality," consequently subverts the vertical and abstract lettered search for the national (v Calderón and Sanjinés 1999: 65). Certainly, from the lettered sublimation of reality or "aesthetization of the real" we are present, with Jorge Sanjinés (let it be made clear, the filmmaker) at a "politicization of the aesthetic" that breaks with "the lettered abstract" in order to construct itself in the here and now.

The subversion of "the sublimating gaze of reality" is not, however, a background exclusive to *The Courage of the People*, for the filmic work by Sanjinés as a whole is constructed on democratic parameters — if anything — as a rupture with "the lettered." This is not a case, then, of a cinema constructed "for" the people; on the contrary, the films of Sanjinés are constructed "with" and "from" the people. This is precisely the originality of Sanjinés within Bolivian cinema. In this sense, the background of the "all-encompassing sequence shot" that, as a narrative resource, is closer to the visual perception that Andean cultures have of the world. All the same, the structuring of the film aesthetic according to Andean elements, making indigenous people active participants, is the reflection of what Calderón and Sanjinés call "de-sublimation of reality."

The rupture in the cinema of Jorge Sanjinés with the "lettered gaze" is expressed clearly in relation to the discourse on *mestizaje* constructed in the early 20th century by Bolivian intellectuals and strongly disseminated, in its homogenizing version, by "revolutionary nationalism." For, if the idealized and homogenizing quest for *mestizaje* is constructed as a "sublimating intention" (v Sanjinés & Calderón, 1996) of the nationalist discourse as a search for "the national," Jorge Sanjinés, on the contrary, questions this idealized and vertical gaze to propose, with his cinema, a more open way — let us say it in those terms — and a more radical way (at the same time) of defining the nation. According to this logic *The Hidden Nation*, just like this filmmaker's other work, questions the construction of the homogeneous and idealized mestizo to project, as a counterpoint, an "organic nation" according to the "Andean essence." However, the representation of the homogeneous and idealized mestizo as negative, in contrast with the affirmation of the Andean quest for the construction of the national, conceals — it appears to me — the same authoritarian form as the "lettered ideal."

8. From the clandestine to the visible, by way of a conclusion

The Hidden Nation is, strictly speaking, Jorge Sanjinés' political-ideological and aesthetic self-affirmation with regard to the Andean indigenous cultures of Bolivia. Prevailing in the background of the film, without a doubt, is a radical criticism of *mestizaje* "as a discourse of power," to cite Javier Sanjinés (2005) which, throughout history, has negated the indigenous as a way of conceiving the national. Hence the way in which the interpretation of *mestizaje* is constructed, in the narrative weave, is a negative way, subjected to an impossibility. This characterization, as we have seen, emerges from a rupture with the indigenous and its consequent negation. In this way, ethnic and cultural mixing, in counterpoint to the cosmic vision of the Andean world, is associated — almost mechanically — with the betrayal and servility that characterize the figure of the "acculturated Indian" underlying social imaginaries. For this reason Jorge Sanjinés, countering the national discourse on *mestizaje*, understands that the only possibility of constructing and constituting an "organic nation" in Bolivia is through an assimilation of the "Andean essence."

To conclude, the proposal made by Sanjinés with regard to the national problem not only reveals the cultural limits of *mestizaje* in the possible national construction of Bolivia, but it turns this on its head, as Javier Sanjinés (2005) suggests, with regard to the recent social movements faced with the image of *mestizaje* — and proposes its disarticulation. Given these circumstances we can today note the grave crisis in this homogenizing discourse of *mestizaje* and the emergence, still ambivalent, of new ways of thinking the national from the multiple, from the diverse, and, with Jorge Sanjinés, above all from the "Andean essence." In some way, then, the film is also a synthesis of the subaltern movements against hegemonic integration, at least in its idealized outline of *mestizaje*.

Go to Notes page

Notes

Quispe's acknowledgment: The initial ideas presented in this work correspond to a chapter I wrote in "*Cine y mestizaje. Emblemas y imaginaries de lo mestizo en el cine boliviano*" (Cinema and *mestizaje*. Emblems and Imaginaries of the *Mestizo* in Bolivian Cinema), Collective Research Workshop (2005) at the Department of Sociology, Universidad Mayor de San Simón.

1. Translator's note: a new film by Sanjinés, entitled *Insurgentes*, has been released this year (2012). Further notes, unless otherwise indicated, are the author's. [return to page 1]

2. The "Indian problem" and the Andean telluric, earthly force inscribed in *Ukamau* (1966) inaugurate the process of indigenist interpretation. *Blood of the Condor* (1969) sees a clarification — perhaps a definition — of the filmmaker's political posture, still imprecise in *Ukamau*, which will become radicalized in *The Courage of the People* (1971) with the idea of the "collective character" (framed in the massacres of miners). This overshadows the individual protagonist of the two previous films to become firmly established in *The Principal Enemy* (1973), *Get Out of Here* (1977) and *The Flags of Dawn* (1983), films which, each in their own way, go deeper into the indigenous problematic (see Mesa 1985: 79-102).

3. Translator's note: the term "*mestizo*" applies to those considered of mixed (white-Indian) heritage, while "*cholo*" is used (often disparagingly) for the urban Indian at some point in the process of acculturation.

4. The same author considers that, in colonial social stratification, the mestizos and *cholos* (the latter being children of mestizos and Indians) constituted the "intermediate caste" between indigenous society and Spanish society. "In historical development, and as a result of little-analyzed processes such as nominal changes (and what they imply) in the social hierarchy of the 'republican' era, the term [mestizo], which in the 19th century still designated a sector of the population that was neither Creole nor western, comes to have a much broader content in our [20th] century." (Barragán 1992: 23).

5. Translator's note: see note 3 above — it should be remembered that such categorizations can depend as much on social and economic status as on biological conditions. In this context 'creole', which once indicated a person of Spanish descent but born in the Americas, is today a reference to the urban culture that is a legacy of this demographic sector.

6. From the early decades of the 20th century *mestizaje*, set out mainly in the literary production and essay-writing of that era, has been subject to the imaginary construction of the nation. These interpretations, which inaugurated the problematic of the national question in Bolivia, continued during later decades in varying shades. Thus, in the period following the Chaco War (1932-1935), the political class and the military constituted a mestizo-Creole sector whose re-thinking of the country was supported by a "mestizo imaginary" since national popular discourse turned into an attractive political ideology; these circumstances marked a convergent "social force of *mestizaje*." The 1952 National Revolution, which buried the liberal oligarchy, similarly deepened the social force in such a way that "imagined *mestizaje*" turned into the cultural force in the construction of the "new nation." In other words, the elite supporters of the ruling National Revolutionary Movement sought a national reconstruction that was based on a mestizo imaginary (see Sanjinés C 2005).

7. Translator's note: these are further categorizations akin to those explained in note 3.

8. A precise element that configures the image of the "acculturated Indian" in the protagonist is the change of surname, which clearly manifests a rejection of his Andean identity. However, this false alteration becomes a motive of mockery in the mouths of two government functionaries. All the same, it is possible to identify two intentions in the change of surname: on the one hand the intention of "social climbing" is implicit and on the other, the intention of "survival" is visible, if perhaps more superficial.
[return to page 2]

9. Indeed, the similarity is noteworthy between the sense of death in Sanjinés and the Christian death of Jesus. The idea of sacrifice, both in the Judeo-Christian tradition and in this film, marks the possibility of a higher cause. Sebastián (in the *Danzante*) just like Jesus (on the cross) offers the immolation of his "human experience" for a "renewal."

10. Translator's note: here, 'lettered' refers to a dichotomy explored by Ángel Rama's *The Lettered City* (1986); a colonial legacy of writing as power that traditionally excluded non-whites from both literacy and the urban environment.

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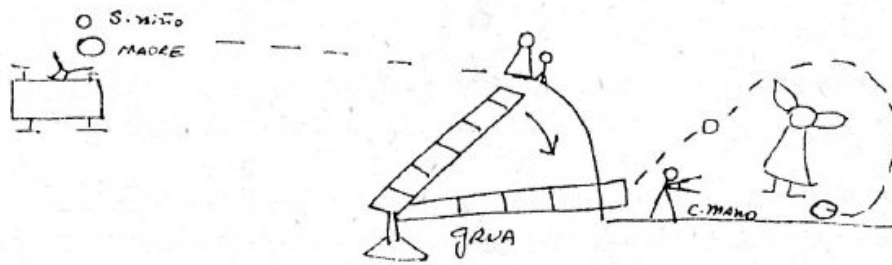

The all-encompassing sequence shot

by Jorge Sanjinés, 1989

translated by [Cecilia Cornejo](#) and [Dennis Hanlon](#)

A visual essay depicting an early sequence shot in *La nación clandestina*

... cuando bailó en nuestra tierra el último Gran Señor Danzante...

Drawing by Sanjinés from script for the film. The cameraman, holding the camera, circles the dancer, then steps onto a crane. The crane tilts up and pans left to reveal the young Sebástian's mother finding him watching the dance. This scene comes during the credit sequence.

In the preceding scene, we hear exposition central to the plot.

Man: "I wonder, how did Sebastian know about El Gran Señor Danzante? He who never came to Willkani—how did he know?"

Woman: "You were very little and don't remember. He was seven when they danced the last Gran Señor Danzante around here..."

El joven Benedicto bailó hasta morir por la comunidad.

El joven Benedicto bailó hasta morir por la comunidad.

The young Benedicto danced to death for...

...the community. Sebastian saw it all and ...

... it made a huge impression on him."

In this sequence the handheld camera ...

... circles the dancers.

Figures move into close up as ...

... they pass by close to the cameraperson.

The sequence shot's emphasis on the ...

...dancers ends with swirling close ups of ...

... the Grand Señor's mask.

Now on the crane, the camera begins to ....

...tilt up and pan left.

¡Sebastian! ¡Baja de ahí!
¡Sebastian! ¡Te vas a caer!

As the camera continues to pan left ...

... Sebastián's mother is revealed.

With the crane continuing its movement left and up, the young Sebastián is revealed. The drawing above indicates a final planned dolly shot (represented by the rectangle on the left) following Sebastián and his mother home. In the finished film, the shot is cut after the camera pauses for this framing, and the titles appear. A graphic match cuts from Sebastian on the hill to a piper on a hill, with music and sound design credits superimposed.

sonido directo
JUAN GUARANI

Go to essay on page 2

The all-encompassing sequence shot

by Jorge Sanjinés, 1989

translated by Cecilia Cornejo and Dennis Hanlon

In the ongoing formal investigations we had to face in order to communicate effectively and coherently, the main concern, in terms of cinematic grammar, has been to determine the shooting and editing styles appropriate for our addressees' 'internal rhythms' and unique cosmovision.[1] [open endnotes in new window] We must keep in mind that these addressees are not Europeans, North Americans, or even residents of Buenos Aires, but rather the Andean masses, the millions of Aymara and Quechua peasants, the hundreds of thousands of laborers and workers who trace their origins to these cultures, as well as those Andean city-dwellers who, consciously or unconsciously, respond in a similar way to a cultural sensibility sustained by centuries of contact, exchange, and interpenetration with the potent cultures of the Andes. Because, curiously enough, a sophisticated Bolivian intellectual who prides himself on having mastered Proust's *oeuvre*, composed rhymes in Greek like Franz Tamayo[2], or written only in French, almost always expresses, in his [sic] manners, attitudes, and ways of thinking, the accumulated sediment which centuries of Aymara and Quechua thought have left in his being, despite the racism, scorn, and even virulent hatred his class levels towards those oppressed masses, the direct heirs of the Andean tradition. And so, a doctor in La Paz or Cochabamba is different from an educated native of Santa Cruz, even though both are Bolivian.

The *cruceño* intellectual, a direct descendent of the Spanish colonizers, isolated by the green wall of the jungle and the imposing chain of the Andes, speaks and thinks in a different fashion; he constructs his universe differently, and his understanding of nature is propelled by the exuberance, by the heat and the torrential rains. The climate makes him a boisterous, gregarious, and cheerful *parrandero*.[3] His childhood memories were never populated by the magic of the mountain winds, nor was he nourished by Aymara women who would speak to him in their native tongue, telling him tales of *anchancho*, the imp of the high pampas. His ears never heard the harsh and profound longing of the *zampoñas*, the *pinkillos*, the lament of the *quenas*, or the infinite silence of the pampas.[4] That is why this *cruceño*, who is

La nación clandestina: Sebastián's workshop in

the city. The night before Sebastián's departure for Willkani, where he will perform the *Jacha Tata Danzante*, his apprentice comes to his coffin-making workshop to try to dissuade him from going. Sebastián has already disposed of his belongings and proceeded to get violently drunk. The relatively tight framing of the characters creates renders the space claustrophobic and coffin-like. The relentlessly circular tracking of the camera imparts a sense of Sebastián's drunkenness and moral panic.


Camera position 2 on the drawing.

Camera position 4.

Camera position 6.

closer to Corumbá in Brazil than La Paz, Cuzco, or Quito, is culturally different. But no matter how Europeanized or Americanized a gentleman from the Peruvian highlands might appear from the outside, he will be much better able to understand a language designed within the communicative parameters of the Andean peoples, for the 'infiltrations', the rhythms, cadences, and style of the Andes reside deep in his psyche.
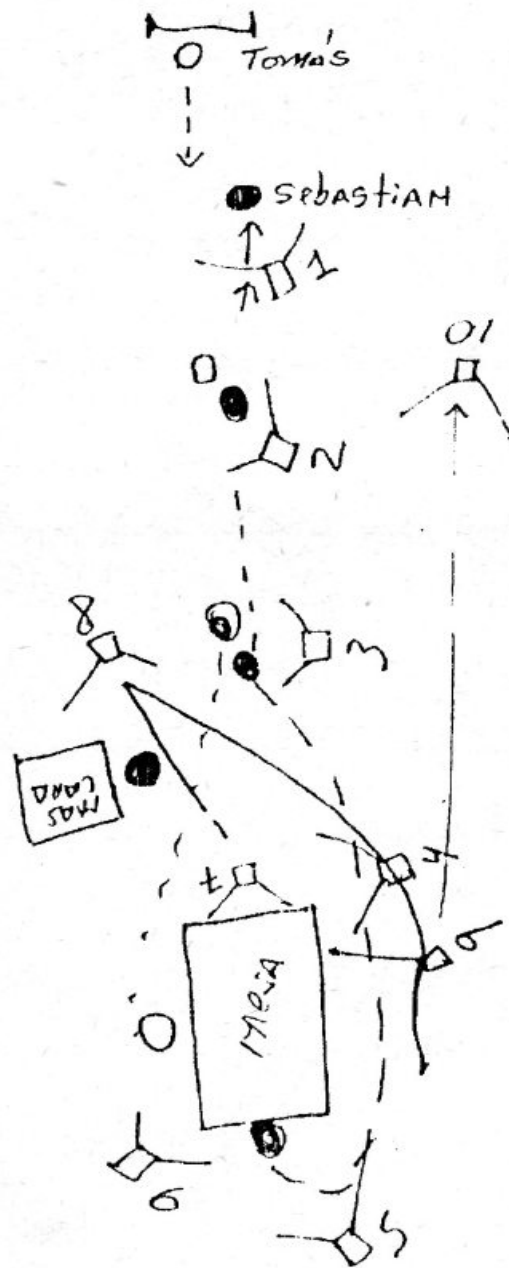
La nación clandestina script: Sanjinés' drawing of the shooting of a scene in Sebastián's workshop, which was carefully followed in the actual filming. The scene is captured in a sequence shot.

For all these reasons, when we speak of an addressee, we understand this to represent a greater spectrum of people than just the Aymara

and Quechua peasants. It could be that some are more able than others to apprehend this language, but this seems relative to us.

From the break we proposed with the mechanics of our narrative starting with our experience with *Yawar Mallku* (*Blood of the Condor*, 1969)—a film whose language was based on elements learned from European-American cinema—beginning with *El coraje del pueblo* (*The Courage of the People*, 1971), we undertook a search for a structure that would contravene the tradition of the individual protagonist so present in fiction films in order to affirm the collective protagonist. But it was in the next film, *El enemigo principal* (*The Principal Enemy*, 1974), that narrative changes geared toward finding cultural and psychological coherence, along with effective communication, began to appear more clearly. With this film begins the use of the sequence shot[5] as well as the practice of revealing the plot's resolution in advance as a means of neutralizing suspense in order to create spaces of reflection, thus liberating the spectator from the traps common to all plots based on red herrings and deceit. Similar to the way that the individual protagonist creates powerful bonds of subjective identification with the spectator, suspense, as a narrative tool, manipulates the spectator's attention, closing off spaces and times for reflection.

Camera position 8.

All incorporated elements sought consistency with the basic proposition of such works, which were proposed as spaces in which the masses can reflect upon themselves. At the same time, these films attempted to more closely approximate the Andean cultural structures, in which the collective predominates over the individual. Quechua storytelling itself is founded upon foreknowledge of the plot's resolution and contents prior to the playing out of the narrative.

Camera position 10.

In *El enemigo principal* the sequence shot began to interpret the collective gaze while suggesting the spectator's participation within the scene. Unfortunately, due to technical and often times material limitations—mainly the lack of film stock—it was not possible to realize the goals of the original project, which was to make the entire film in lengthy sequence shots. The same thing happened in the next film, *¡Fuera de aquí!* (*Get Out of Here!*, 1977); we still had not yet reached a definitive understanding of what we were looking for in implementing the sequence shot. In *¡Fuera de aquí!* we achieved three or four sequence shots that completely encompassed a whole sequence. In the rest of the film, however, as with *El enemigo principal*, it often happened that a single sequence was composed of several lengthy, hand-held shots whose internal logic failed to correspond with our aims, succeeding only at times in transmitting a collective point of view and offering a sense of participation. Mixing these lengthy takes with close-ups wrecked the style and diminished the effectiveness of our approach.

Nevertheless, these experiments did much to affirm our resolve to find a sequence shot in keeping with the ideological and cultural requirements. It became evident that the sequence shot—because of the ample spaces it offered, the near absence of abrupt close-ups, and the dominant presence of a group of performers who could follow and attend to the action—introduced yet another element, one which undeniably conferred the sequence shot with a democratic dimension,

Japanese poster for *La nación clandestina*.

for here were non-professional actors who could choose whether or not to engage in ways that, although unscripted, were welcome.

Within this technical approach, the close-up ceased to take the leading role, and if we chose to use it at all, it responded to the collective actor's decision to take a closer look at something. Thus the close-up lost its connotations of individualism and dominance. It was not imposed on the spectator but made its way to him out of its own volition or the demands of the internal dynamics of the scene.

We have indicated elsewhere our belief that form determines content, which could mean the same as McLuhan's well-known dictum.[6] It is clear that the close-up lends itself to an iconic reading of ideological and historical contents which correspond to western European culture, and that its hermeneutic contradicts the communal and collective conceptions found in other cultures. That being said, our goal is not to completely do away with this narrative resource, but rather to use it under different coordinates.

Consequently, in order to develop the theory of what we like to call the all-encompassing sequence shot, we must first make a brief historical summary of some narrative elements of cinema.

History

When cinema first reveals its expressive possibilities and manifests itself as a new art form, the close-up quickly comes to occupy the most prominent place in cinema's expressive resources. Griffith in the U.S., Eisenstein, the Russian theorists, the German Expressionists, and all the other great classic European creators use this resource with great mastery, discovering and developing its remarkable possibilities. They use it with complete propriety and great talent, with total cultural and ideological coherence. These are men and creators who belong to a particular culture: the Hellenic Judeo-Christian western culture. They are descendents of Aristotle, Homer, and Esquilo; they were born into a world dominated by the idea of a God-man, and individualism has been instilled in them as life's axis and aspiration. The development of private property has enshrined the rule of man over man, while the powerful ideas of personal accumulation and personal realization, detached from the collective fate, have come to be accepted and projected as inalienable rights. Therefore, in the art of western culture, the singular, the particular, the individual, acquire paramount importance, and their iconic expressions, maximum significance. The close-up takes on a leading role in cinema; it denotes a certain vision of life and way of understanding and constructing reality.

Of course, it would be fanatical and absurd to dismiss the close-up from cinematic narrative solely because it represents a particular cultural stance and contains a specific ideology. It is a completely valid

Sebastián denies his Aymara roots after dancing in the festival of El Gran Poder.

Sebastián's family in front of their home in the village of Willkani.

A radical student fleeing the army asks for help from villagers who cannot understand him.

resource when used to punctuate situations in cinematic narrative and it must be used when the narrative demands it. What is at stake, from our standpoint, is not using the close-up as the western cinema does, since, simply put, such usage lacks coherence with the cosmovision of our peoples, especially the great Andean majorities. The search for a shooting and editing style that expresses this cosmovision while remaining true to the ideological content of our cultures is the task we must engage in.

Obviously, the close-up will be used at similar times in various kinds of narratives. If *we* approach the face of the protagonist, it will be with a pan, a travelling shot, or a handheld camera following a subjective point of view, while an American screenwriter indicates a close-up by means of a direct cut in his script. Both approaches will convey a certain dramatic intensity at a certain moment, but what should interest us is not this similarity but rather their placement in the larger context of the narrative.

Likewise, the fragmentation of scenes into various shots, whether this be for purposes of description or dramatic interest, has its origin, in our view, in the European pictorial tradition. In classical, naturalist, figurative painting, the painter selects a graphic moment, a scene, a person, or a landscape, and then he composes a painting following certain guidelines and "golden" rules that situate and reveal the key points upon which human attention is unconsciously concentrated. Nevertheless, the great masters have broken these rules and produced marvelous works, but generally speaking, art schools teach these rules as the very basis of pictorial composition. In film schools these same rules are appealed to and painting is held up as an example. The cinema ended up orienting itself toward the most conventional of pictorial spaces, adopting the horizontal rectangle as its preferred format.

The tendency to splinter into various "paintings" or frames of careful composition obeys a well-developed grammar cinema began to use to narrate its stories; the fragmented shots that showed their subjects at various distances began to acquire names in a nomenclature that became universal—close-up, *plan américain*,[7] long shot, etc. But it is interesting to note that such fragmentation also reflects a particular way of understanding reality that is consistent with an individualistic vision of society and life. This is a splintered society that seeks resolution through constant ruptures in human relations as well as in its own organic composition. By breaking up space, we render a social universe of remnants, of gaps, of psychological violence, a society of individual spaces, of demarcated territories, of places "owned", a society of rankings, of social differences, of privileges—finally, of class. There is neither continuity nor harmony in western society.

Individualism as an attitude, a life philosophy, and as a social practice, demands that society's expressive components be sealed off from one another—each individual in his little box, every person in "her" own

world, every ego in its proper cell. The "I" of the close-up reigns onscreen; the language of mutilation gained great force through it, and so it was accepted and preserved as natural. It was and is consistent with the cosmovision of a society that has perturbed and denatured the integrity of relationships among people and that has desecrated the relationship between humans and nature, destroying the continuity and complementarity vital to both.

For all these reasons, in order to narrate the lives and struggles of the Andean people, especially groups like the Aymara, who make up a huge percentage of the Bolivian population (circa 40%), it is most appropriate to use a cinematic language of greater scenic continuity, one less fragmented that allows a feel for the same collective integrity they have created and developed as a way of resolving their internal relations and their relations with nature, of which they believe themselves to be part, not owners.

[Go to page 3](#)

Technique

March of community members of Willkani in *La nación clandestina*. In this sequence, the community of Willkani, Sebastián's home *ayllu*, marches to a meeting place, where they consider how to respond to the military coup underway and support the striking miners. The long shot of the community, which advances to fill the frame, creates a visual contrast with the repeated long shots of the solitary Sebastián crossing the *altiplano*. When the camera follows Sebastián's brother, Vicente, in close-up, it is because he has become the natural subject of interest for the group. The framing at the end of the shot, with Vicente in the foreground and the community in the background, emphasizes his integration with the group, as opposed to his brother's isolation.

The community members appear over the crest of a hill, marching directly toward a camera shoulder height.

In our previous attempts we started from the basic idea of transmitting the impression of the spectator's participation in the interior of the scene. The camera moved interpreting the spectator's point of view, choosing moments and framings according to the logical and natural interest the dramatic action sparked. Medium shots and *plans américain* dominated the sequences, always respecting the spaces these shots afforded for spontaneous interventions; however, oftentimes these spaces were restricted because of the need for rhythm in editing. Camera movements did not have a foreseen ending because the individual or collective performance was largely left open to improvisation, or, starting from central ideas, could develop without limit until the roll of negative ran out—thus it was generally left to the editor, rather than the screenwriter or director, to determine when the shot should end.
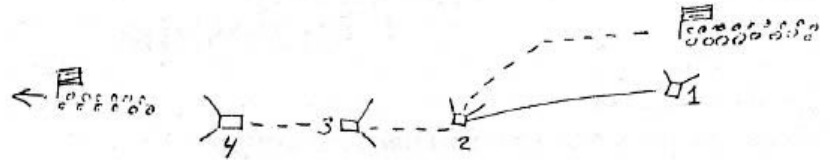
The March of the Community Members of Willkani. Sanjinés' original plan for filming the march.

This technique entailed severe narrative risks, as it made the context too susceptible to unforeseen circumstances that could disturb the film's flow or rhythm. Likewise, in the absence of limits placed on the camera movement beforehand, the final composition was left to chance and usually could not be retained in editing. The shot's initial composition could be foreseen, but not the final.

Another limitation presented itself when, as a scene developed, after holding the camera in a proper framing, it had to be suddenly displaced without motivation in order to get a tighter shot or reframe something, thus revealing the presence of the camera to the spectator. This violated the principle of participation, which depends upon achieving nearly imperceptible movements that interpret the spectator's desire to move within the interior of the frame.

The advantage of this technique undoubtedly resided in the liberty of movement, creativity, and improvisation it afforded non-professional

The camera begins to crane upward and pan right as the marchers pass.

The camera continues to pan right and then cranes downward

Camera comes to rest behind the shoulder of Vicente, Sebastián's brother.

Camera leaves crane and follows Vicente hand-held as he walks up to address marchers

actors, generally chosen from amongst people who had lived the experiences being recreated or were familiar with them. Nevertheless, we realized that, by pre-recording on video before the shoot, it was possible to capture spontaneous performances, then order and coordinate them, extracting the essential parts. These could then be re-elaborated in an all-encompassing sequence shot with all the precision the moment of filming on negative stock requires.

All the difficulties and virtues our previous experiences shooting long takes revealed to us helped us to elaborate a different technique until we achieved, after numerous attempts, a narrative mechanic of the sequence shot attuned to the requirements already set forth: the all-encompassing sequence shot.

The all-encompassing sequence shot

In Andean culture, the predominance of the interest of the group, the collectivist tradition, practices of solidarity, and the vision of collectivity, integration, and participation, all comprise, in both their ideological significance and their daily practice, a unique way of facing reality, of resolving problems of life, society and even of one's individuality, which, though subordinated to the interests of the collective, is equally existent and active.

Collective execution is a trait of Andean music. A *Kantu*, an impressive composition for wind and percussion instruments, cannot be played as a solo. Each musician plays his or her *zampoña*, extracting a part of each note, which the others go on to complete in these pieces of extraordinary solemnity. Here the mechanical structure of the execution obeys a group conception, a collective practice, an ideology that privileges communal interests.

To propose a narrative technique appropriate to the Andean cosmovision appeared to us of fundamental importance. To narrate that world cinematographically from within, creating Andean culture with cinema, extending the creative act by integrating the cinematic medium with the internal rhythms of our cultural majority in order to cease exercising a point of view that is distant, external, intrusive, and domineering.

Little by little it became clear to us that the camera had to move uninterruptedly, motivated by the scene's internal dynamic. Only in this way could it achieve imperceptibility and spatial integration. By refraining from fragmenting the sequence into various shots, a new order could be transmitted, one appropriate for peoples who conceive of everything as extensions of themselves. The rhythm would be established internally by the movements of figures and things which, in turn, would dictate the movements of the camera: the tracking shots, the close-ups, and the wider shots that would include the whole group.

In order to execute shots without a cut lasting practically the entire time of a sequence, it became necessary to destroy established schemas. A camera operator who began moving on a dolly might have to move, imperceptibly, to the seat of a crane in order to raise himself to a height coinciding with that of an actor whom he or she would then

Camera comes to rest behind Vicente as he addresses marchers.

Filming *La nación clandestina*.
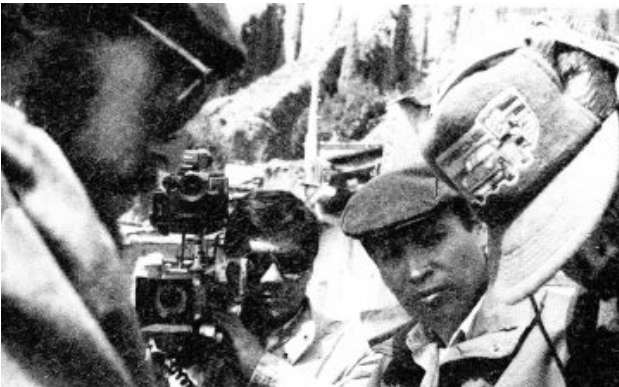
From left to right: Jorge Sanjinés, camaraman Rafael Flores, cinematographer César Pérez, and soundman Guillermo Palacios.

Jorge Sanjinés with cinematographer César Pérez.

immediately follow, camera in hand, to an encounter between this actor and others. Meanwhile, the dolly would be brought to this place, and the camera operator would use it to follow the characters as they speak for a long stretch. Finally, the camera would come to rest in a long close-up, aided by a portable stand that a camera assistant has carefully placed beneath the camera to lend it more stability. The entire shot could last for five or nine minutes, losing none of its intensity or interest.

This technique led us to another: the editing could be done beforehand in the shooting script and during the shooting itself. Since the sequence shot did not allow for internal cuts and its beginning and ending were perfectly delimited, all the camera movements, movements of the actors, mise-en-scene, and framings had to be accomplished very precisely. Therefore, once determined, then filmed and approved subsequent to review on a video monitor attached to the camera, the editing was also approved. The editing of a film would then be reduced to joining together 80 to 100 sequences—and the film would be completely edited!

Within a single sequence the scenario could be changed, but in order for the newly introduced theme to maintain its integrity, it would have to be brought to resolution without a cut.

It is clear that a good script will include instructions for editing the film: it is even possible to calculate with great precision the duration of each shot, indicating exactly how and where they should begin and end. But filmmakers know from experience that it is generally at the editing table that the final rhythm of a sequence is composed, shortening some shots, juxtaposing others, eliminating some, etc. During the editing process, many a film has been salvaged or sunk. The ability of the editor counts for much. With the wrapping of shooting, the film enters a new process. And the script, which oftentimes was modified and improved during shooting, will become a mere organizing tool during editing. The editor will consult the actual image achieved and, of course, the original idea for this image will, in comparison, hold much less weight. For it is the filmed image that imposes its resilience, its own magic—or, conversely, offers its own poverty or mediocrity.

In the Andean Sequence Shot, the process of creating the internal rhythm of the sequence—intuiting when the actors should move or the camera angles be changed in order to create spatial relations, creating a certain atmosphere, or controlling the internal dramatics of a scene —all this must be done in the planning and shooting stages, because its start is a voyage of no return. Once begun, the shot cannot be fractured or fragmented, and it will not be cut until it arrives at its conclusion. This process exercises a profound demand for concentration upon the filmmaker, an enormous effort obliging him or her to mentally visualize the entire sequence. The filmmaker will have to be able to

From right to left: Jorge Sanjinés, cinematographer César Pérez, cameraman Rafael Flores, and Juana Gutierrez.

Jorge Sanjinés with Roque Salgado, who played the role of the *yatiri*, Tata Tankara
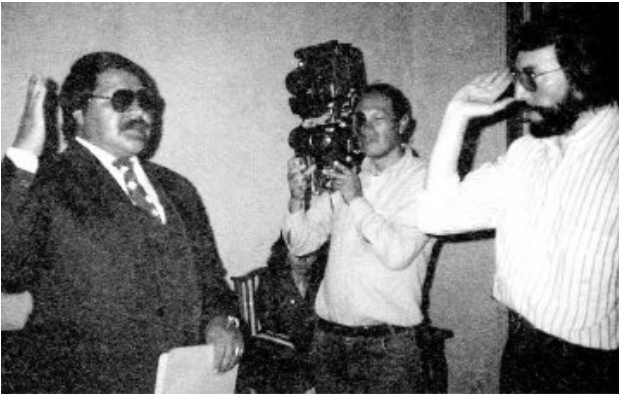
From right to left: Jorge Sanjinés, cameraman Rafael Flores, and actor Carlos Calcina, filming a scene set in the Ministry of the Interior, where Sebastián took a job.

write, imagine, and see in the "moviola" of his or her mind an all-encompassing sequence shot in order to be able to correctly conduct during the shoot the mise-en-scene, editing, and the composition of the spaces and sounds, all of which establish the visual dialectic of the scene. This particular process of planning a sequence shot must be aligned with the general consciousness of the film, its rhythm and overall continuity, so that the timing of each shot has the proper value of tension, growth, or neutrality in relation to the entire film. The filmmaker has to be able to feel, intuit, and know that, for example, shot #41 is in rhythm with those that precede and succeed it. He or she must be able to visualize the whole film before making it, visualize it in detail.

Naturally such a proposition presents extremely grave problems in terms of the camera, lighting, movement of actors, sound, and acting.

It is necessary to rehearse each shot to perfection. The camera operator needs to know exactly where and how to move; he or she must be familiar with the movements of the actors and have memorized their lines as cues, attending with precision to their often abrupt turns and shifts. He or she must do this with such control that no hesitations, slips, or tremors are revealed. The director of photography must place the lights and screens with the camera movements in mind. The direct sound recorder often has the greatest challenge in capturing the voices of the actors as they cross great distances, make 180 degree turns, etc. Lastly, the actors need to learn long speeches by heart, knowing exactly how and when to move during them. One mistake in the final three seconds of a six-minute shot will require the crew to start all over from the beginning.

Another characteristic born of this narrative method is the camera's ability to adopt multiple points of view within a sequence: for example, it might begin with the point of view of a character who remembers something and then change into an instrument for describing that memory. The same shot could adopt a point of view outside both the character's subjective point of view and the reconstructed memory in order to depict the collective vision of other characters who may have come into the frame, contravening the individual viewpoint, eliminating every last trace of those memories, or incorporating itself into that memory in a way that violates space and time.

Conclusion

While this approach involves risks and no small challenges, we propose it as a narrative option that emerges as an expressive need of a certain cosmovision. Hopefully it has a broader spectrum of uses or will allow the formulation of other narrative concerns. Such is the theory, and we suspect that practice will afford confirmations and negations useful to its further elaboration. That praxis will be called *La nación clandestina* (*The Hidden Nation*), currently in production.

Jorge Sanjinés (center) with cast members, the community of Willkani.

Notes

1. A translation of *cosmovisión*, a word used by Andean indigenous intellectuals to describe their perception of time and the external world, as well as their way of being in the world. [return to text]

2. A Bolivian poet, essayist, and politician of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

3. A *parrandero* is something like a man about town.

4. The *zampoña* is an Andean wind instrument like the panpipe; the *pinkillo* and *quena* are Andean flutes.

5. Technically, in a sequence shot, an entire scene is contained in a single, uinterrupted shot. The term is commonly used to refer to shots that last an unusually long time, as it is at times in this essay.

6. A reference to Marshall McLuhan's saying, "The medium is the message."

7. In a *plan américain*, sometimes referred to as a medium long shot, a human figure framed from just below the knees to the top of the head fills most of the screen. It is in between the long shot, in which human figures appear in their entirety, and the medium shot, which frames the human figure from the waist up. The *plan américain* is often used to show groups of people.

To top   Print version   JC 54   *Jump Cut* home

The "new" and the "old" in Bolivian cinema

by [Verónica Córdova S.](#)

translated by [Amy L. Tibbitts](#)

Towards the end of the 1960s, a group of Latin American filmmakers recognized the existence of common experiences and objectives in their films and they defined themselves as a continental film movement, putting aside differences in forms of production or in aesthetic approaches, and privileging the political themes and positions that they shared.

The filmmaker Fernando Birri, one of the founders of the New Latin American Cinema Movement, defines this commonality with only two words: human dignity.

> "The theme of the dignity of man is still a realistic-ideal aspiration, but when this concept is incarnated in praxis, in the action to rescue the dignity of a man who has been condemned to indignity, then the word liberation appears…If this is valid, then I would say to you that 99% of the works that today have certain value in Latin American production are characterized by this common denominator…All of them, in one form or another, with one language or another, also respond to this concept of liberation politics of the continent and the imaginative liberation of the filmmaker."[1][[open endnotes in new window](#)]

The most legendary representative of New Latin American Cinema in Bolivia is, without a doubt, Jorge Sanjinés. It is impossible to understand current Bolivian cinema without having the work of Jorge Sanjinés and the Ukamau Group as a reference. This work, however, is not frozen in time but rather, in its own way, has traversed moments of redefinition, crisis, and rebirth. The practice of filmmaking cannot be analyzed without taking into account the social, political, and economic context that surrounds its production, and between the year 1969 when *Yawar Mallku* (*Blood of the Condor*)primered, the year 1989 which saw *La Nación Clandestina* (*The*

Clandestine Nation), and the year 2004 when *Los Hijos del Ultimo Jardín* (*The Sons of the Last Garden*)was filmed, many things have changed in Bolivia, just as much in the social as in the cinematographic realms.

In the first place, there has been an important change in the modes of production. In the 70s, the New Latin American Cinema was just as opposed to Hollywood's industrial form of production as to Mexico's comerical industries or Brazil's auterist films, an imperfect cinema, a cinema that could be made with only

> "an idea in the head and a camera in the hand."

On the level of forms, this cinematographic subversion was characterized by filming at real locations, working with non-professional actors and with not always professional personnel, and by the use equipment that was as light, managable, and cheap as celluloide-based motion pictures permitted. At the narrative level, a clear poltical objective generated the necessesity to refelct social problems and denounce both individuals and organizations responsible for those problems. In the words of Jorge Sanjinés,

> "revolutionary film does not tell histories, rather it makes History."[2]

Furthermore, given the political instability and in many cases the clandestine form in which the films from that era were filmed and projected, the Ukamau Group developed during their time their own exhibition and distribution circuts outside of commerical movie theaters, creating an itinerant web of projections in schools, union meeting places, and rural communities.

Lastly, in ideological terms the New Latin American Cinema in general and the films of Jorge Sanjinés in particular, arose the main objective to make film *for* the people and *together with* the people.

Today, as a result of the domination of the large North American chains of film distribution and exhibition, it is much more likely that *the people* would gather outside a movie theater at the premier of a Holloywood blockbuster film, than at the premier of a Bolivian film.

In fact, the word *popular* aquires various contradictory meanings when it is applied to forms of mass communication. On the one hand, *popular* is something that attempts to reach or reaches massive audience's support; in the sense we refer to music groups or popular fashions. On the other hand, *popular* also refers to something that pertains to the people, and that makes the people a protagonist upon reflecting its struggles and problems. In Bolivia there even exists a more pejorative meaning of *the popular* when referring to something that appeals to a lower-class audience, such as when one speaks about "popular theater" as something other than theater in general.

In today's Bolivian film, there are three types of examples of appropriation

of the objective of being *popular*, since only what is *popular* implies crowds in the movie theater: a last resort to get ticket sales and to recuperate what has been invested in the film.

There are movies that try to be popular in the sense of being commercial, utilizing narrative and formal strategies of Hollywood films with the objective of being

> "film of good quality that reinterprets our reality and that, without stopping to be original and 'ours' achieves a universal language."[3]

On the other hand, Jorge Sanjinés' films continue to fight to be popular in the way they deserve, taking into account how they respond to the people's needs. From even a radical perspective, Sanjinés believes it is a contradiction to touch on a Latin American theme using narrative strategies that respond to cultural identities foreign to what is being shown. Moreover, Sanjinés harshly criticizes those Latin American filmmakers who despite the social and political conditions of the region during the 80s and 90s, saying,

> "we have remained too passive, too contemporary, and what is worse, many of us are proposing or making concessions to our films under the deceitful justification that what is most important is 'occupying screens', as if the remedy for prostitution is to prostitute oneself!"[4]

There exists a third possibility: to make popular cinema that appeals to lower or middle class audiences, those characterized a priori as simple, undereducated, and as having vulgar taste.   For this reason, films are made that appeal to this supposed "popular" taste, utilizing a mix of regional archetypes, cultural entanglements and filmic clichés to achieve the support of a "people" upon whom the filmmaker looks down on from above, wanting to please them with the same simplicity and vulgarity used to pejoratively characterize them.

This desperate search for popularity, in whichever of its connotations, has less to do with an ideological position than with the inescapable need to recuperate at the national box-office at least part of the investment that was used to produce the movie. Since 1994, when the *Fondo de Formento Cinematográfico* (Film Development Fund), established by Law 1302 or Law of Bolivian Film, started to work, producers and directors have had access to funding in cash to undertake cinematographic projects. This financing is, however, a double-edged sword. The State, through the National Council on Film, lends the producer amounts of up to one hundred thousand dollars for the production of films at a 7% interest rate and with only two years to pay it back.

The logic with which Bolivian film is "promoted" has brought two disastrous consequences. The first is the direct destruction of the *Fondo de Formento Cinematográfico*, since the filmmakers see themselves as constantly obligated to adjusts their payments or to default, which has

reduced the fund to the point that it is practically inexistent. Because of this, filmmakers from new generations who today want to access the fund cannot do so, which means that Bolivian film looses films of potential directors.

The second consequence of the inappropriate form in which the promotion of Bolivian filmmakers has been regulated, is that filmmakers who have obtained this financing are in debt for a number of years, during which they must concentrate on making their payments and, therefore, cannot generate new film projects. It is because of this other form that Bolivian film also looses potential movies from established directors.

From this situation, one could deduce that the production of Bolivian film —as much the "old" directors as the "new"—have diminished over the last years. But exactly the opposite has happened, thanks to one final aspect that I want to consider in this article: the inclusion of digital technology and its consequences in the mode of production and the narrative of Bolivian contemporary film.

Since Jorge Sanjinés premiered *Los Hijos del ultimo Jardín* in 2004, his first movie filmed digitally, there has been a boom of national cinema not only filmed but also shown in this format. Between the years 2002 and 2006 we can count 10 feature length movies filmed digitally and 3 feature length movies filmed in digital and transferred to celluloid that have been shown in commercial movie theaters in the country. If we add to these feature length films those filmed and shown in celluloid during this same time period, we have an astonishing number of 19 feature length films over the span of 4 years, converting this time, by a lot, into the most fruitful period in the history of Bolivian film.

Contradictorily, this period of technological and narrative innovation, and the inclusion of new generations, perspectives, and regions in Bolivian film have come accompanied with a series of crisis in the internal cinematographic market. The decline in the purchasing capacity of the majority of the population, the access to television, video, and cable, as well as the enormous expansion of piracy of the DVD medium, has provoked a massive closing of movie theaters and independent distributing companies. As a consequence, there exist greater possibilities to make movies, but the probability of recuperating the production expenses at the box office gets more remote each time.

From the mode of production's perspective, today there exist in Bolivia many ways to make films. In the majority of the cases, the films from "old" filmmakers or those who count on support from *Conacine* (National Film Council) film in celluloid and in professional work conditions, requiring because of that a much higher investment and risk level. On the other hand, the majority of feature length films from "new" filmmakers made digitally are produced in a mode of production more reminiscent of that from the 60s and 70s: minimum equipment, real locations, non-professional personnel, and in many cases, unpaid.

One could think that the changes in technology mean that we newly have

arrived to the era in which film is done with "an idea in the head and a camera in the hand." The "new" filmmakers today are united with the "old" filmmakers in terms of passion and the need to make films against all the obstacles, even though their nature has changed over time. The "old" filmmaker of New Latin American Cinema risked jail, exile, or even life by making a film. The "new" Latin American filmmakers risk their family's stability, prestige, and sometimes even their shirt. I remain doubtful if the motives have also changed. The "old" filmmaker made films to change History. Why does the "new" filmmaker make films?

I prefer that each of them (us) answer this question as individuals.

Go to Notes page

Notes

1. Birri, Fernando. In an interview conducted at EICTV in December 1993. [return to text]

2. Cited in *A Filmic Approach to Latin American's Past*, in Burns, Bradford E. (ed.) *Latin American Cinema. Film and History*. UCLA Latin American Center, Los Angeles 1975. pg. 29

3. Marquez, Mela. *En busca de un cine posible (In Search of a possible cinema).* A paper presented in a seminar titled *Hacer cine es tarea de todos (Making Film is Everyone's Job)*, La Paz, April 2000.

4. Sanjinés, Jorge. *El perfil imborrable (The Indelible Profile).* A paper presented in a seminar titled *El Nuevo Cine Latinomericano en el Mundo de Hoy (New Latin American Cinema in Today's World).* La Habana, 1987.

A cinema of questions: a response to Verónica Córdova

by [Martín Boulocq](#)

translated by [Amy L. Tibbitts](#)

About a month ago I received an email from a friend who is the editor of the journal *Cuarto Intermedio*. He asked me if I would write something about Bolivian film for the next issue, "and even better," he said, "would be if you could relate your piece to an article that Verónica Córdova wrote that we are publishing in the next edition." Córdova's article is titled "The New and the Old in Bolivian Cinema" and refers to the motivations by which Latin American filmmakers, from what came to be known as "New Latin American Cinema" of the 60s and 50s, made films. Córdova's article ends with a question: if the "old" filmmaker made films to change History, why does the "new" filmmaker make films?

I have to confess that, on the one hand, it was not at all easy for me to sit down and write an article that would respond to that question. On the other hand, I felt an almost moral obligation to do so. This is why I am taking advantage of this opportunity to sit here with all of you and throw around a few ideas.

Here I quote a few lines from Córdova's article:

> "[Some filmmakers] defined themselves as a continental film movement, putting aside differences in forms of production or in aesthetic approaches, and privileging the political themes and positions that they shared…an aesthetic-political movement that transcended film in order to insert itself in the continental fight for liberation." In the words of Fernando Birri: 'Films, tendencies, directors that did not explore in one way or another the dignity and necessity of human liberation, cannot be included in the New Latin American Film'."

I am reminded of an episode from that movie that was made in commemoration of 100 years of film, *Lumière y compañía* (*Lumière and Company*), in which various directors of distinct trajectories are invited to

make a one-minute short film utilizing the same camera with which the Lumière brothers made their first films. The film, in addition to the short films and documentary style, showed part of the process of the directors' filmmaking and posed a common question to all of the filmmakers: "Why do you make films?" The responses varied widely, but the one that impressed me the most was one from a filmmaker who remained silent while looking at the camera without knowing how to respond.

I am sorry to tell you that what I have to offer today are more questions than answers. However, I sense that in the act of asking, and including within the questions themselves, one can find clues to possible answers.

Why make film in Bolivia today? Do the same trends in Bolivian film exist now as in the 60s and 70s?

The first danger I find when speaking of "new cinema" and "old cinema" is to place all of the filmmakers in the same bag. I do not think that someone who makes films today in Bolivia is responding to the same worries and less that one can unanimously answer the question: Why does one make films today in Bolivia? If in the 60s and 70s the what is now known as "New Latin American Cinema" responded nearly in unison to a common stance, does that mean that today's Latin American cinema should do the same?

An old friend, who could have been my grandfather, after seeing *Lo más bonito y mis mejors años (The Most Beautiful of my Very Best Years)*, told me "The world today is gray. In my time, it was either Black or White; we could choose, and what's more, we were supposed to choose. Not today, now there is nothing to choose." I ask myself, "Is it that our generation has lost all hope to change the world"? Do the "new" filmmakers believe that film can change the world? Today it seems somewhat pretentious to throw around an assertion like the one Godard made in the 60s, "I make film to change the world."

I find myself limited to speak from the cinema that I consider closest to me. A cinema that does not pretend to resolve social and political problems (does this imply disassociating oneself from the political act of talking about small social circles such as family, friends, couples?). A cinema, unlike the militant cinema of that time, with more questions than answers. With more questionings and ambiguities than discourses and certainties. A cinema that forces me as an individual—not as a "film director"—to put a mirror in front of myself before looking elsewhere. A cinema that is perhaps arbitrary because it is personal. A cinema that because it is personal stops questioning the other. A cinema that speaks about close experiences. A cinema that explores its aesthetics through the technological possibilities within its reach and that responds to its reality. A cinema that thinks within a universal frame while still being local (because today more than ever it is impossible to think of oneself as isolated from the rest of the world). A cinema that dialogues with current filmmaking not only from Latin America, but also with other corners of the planet.

Insurgentes: the slight return of Jorge Sanjinés

by [Keith John Richards](#)

Juan Pablo Urioste adds an eye for the decorative elements of indigenous culture and history.

The isolation of President Villaroel in the Palacio Quemado is emphasized.

Insurgentes (2012) marks a homecoming for Jorge Sanjinés, once exiled geopolitically by implacable political enemies but more recently estranged, and for more enigmatic reasons, from the thematic current most readily associated with his work. Since *A Clandestine Nation* in 1989, Sanjinés had only skirted the radical indigenism with which he made his name and which characterizes his best films. This tendency was a part of the militant New Latin American Cinema that offered a response to the military dictatorships of the 1960s and 70s. In the case of Bolivia, and the Ukamau Group of which Sanjinés was part, it took the form of a cinematic practice conceived as directly concerning popular interests and involving the relevant groups and communities, as the filmmaker explained in *Theory and practice of a cinema with the people*.[1] [[open endotes in new window](#)]

This notion of popular participation in filming envisaged close identification between the filmmaker and a marginalized subject in its address to audiences in both urban and rural spheres. The ideal was to obtain prior consent and subsequent contribution, particularly from the indigenous communities that were the specific focus of Ukamau's films. This is best expressed in Sanjinés' late 60s output; *Ukamau* (*And so it is*, 1966) is less ideologically-informed than his later films, but a sense of outrage is already visible in its story of the rape of an indigenous woman by a mestizo landowner. *The Courage of the People* (1971) tells of a notorious massacre of miners, while *Blood of the Condor* (1969) with its denunciation of the covert sterilization of indigenous women, resulted in the expulsion of the U.S. Peace Corps from Bolivia. Both films were made with direct participation from the communities concerned.

On the one hand, it is gratifying to see Sanjinés returning to what he does best – direct political commentary – after dabbling in allegorical and poetic approaches with *To Hear the Birds Sing* (1995) and *Children of the Last Garden* (2004). On the other, *Insurgentes* is a somewhat patchy and unsatisfying return to the territory once graced with the above classics. With the almost ubiquitous shift in Bolivian cinema to an urban context, this may well be the last film of its kind.

That this film appears at all is partly a reflection of the sea change that has occurred in Bolivian society: to champion indigenous rights is now

to inhabit the political mainstream, however contradictory the ostensibly *indianista* position of the current MAS (Movement to Socialism) government may have become. The coca workers' union leader Evo Morales won the Bolivian presidency at the second attempt in December 2005, since when his administration has faced numerous challenges from the right, particularly in the form of secessionist threats and gestures from the peripheral areas of the country (mostly Santa Cruz, Sucre and Tarija) that semi-surround La Paz. However, the government has also faced charges of corruption and become too close to corporate interests, above all Brazilian, for the likes of many of its supporters. Almost exclusively hostile media coverage exacerbated the situation, but at one time paradoxically helped create the image of Evo as martyr. But MAS has still contrived to fritter away much of the goodwill it once took for granted in a string of pratfalls and scandals. The famous knee-jerk (literally) to the groin with which Morales felled an opponent on the football field in 2010 only added to his flesh-and-blood credibility. There have been far more serious problems, though, such as the series of scandals involving Santos Ramírez, the man once groomed as Evo's successor, and the state petroleum company YPFB. Despite such setbacks, the MAS government still has little serious opposition and will probably prevail at the next election.

The premiere of *Insurgentes* illustrated the paradox. It was held, not in the municipal *Cine 6 de Agosto* (saved and restored by popular demand and at government expense) but in the incongruous surroundings of the recently-built Megacenter, a capitalist cathedral located in La Paz's wealthy Zona Sur, with Evo and Vice-President Álvaro García Linera in attendance. Evo's and Álvaro's arrival, and their passage among the gleaming SUVs and domestic appliances on offer to greet a purportedly revolutionary film, seemed to sum up this government's quandary: a radical posture and defiant discourse confounded by craven obeisance to external economic forces. The Morales government has, from the outset, taken a defiant attitude to the US, seeking alternative trade links such as China and, more controversially, Iran. However, the government refuses to acknowledge any validity in the opposition to its plans to build a road through the lowland indigenous sanctuary and national park known as TIPNIS, a move that would benefit the highland peoples who form much of the MAS power base. The decision to open TIPNIS to a transcontinental road development has had a deep impact on Evo's erstwhile supporters, who see the government's refusal to even receive the delegation that had marched for over 60 days to La Paz as a moral abdication. Instead, the government has run TV ads describing inhabitants of TIPNIS as impoverished and in need of 'development' – even linking them to the secessionist movement centered in the east of the country that attempted to bring the government down during its first few years in office. MAS has largely squandered the support generated during its inception, and during those beleaguered times, and made itself enemies even in much of its rural indigenous power base.

Thus Sanjinés finds himself, late in life, in an unaccustomed position – as an establishment figurehead, after so many years in varying degrees of opposition to political authority. The very construction of *Insurgentes* can be largely seen to reflect the official position. The film, indeed, was largely funded by the Morales government. Indeed, the

lukewarm response received by the film perhaps reflects the cooling of support for Evo, whose lamentable refusal to accept indigenous opposition flies in the face of his avowed stance as champion of native rights. If *Insurgentes* has meanwhile been seen by substantial numbers of people, this might be due to the undeniable importance of Sanjinés and his work. This position seems to be echoed in Sanjinés' concentration on Andean highland rebellion; the lowlands are mentioned, briefly, on only one occasion.

Juan Pablo Urioste's excellent photography ensures that the Andean landscapes are fully exploited for their dramatic potential while the film takes a diachronic view of successive and to some extent repetitive conflicts marking Bolivian history; the early 20th-century execution of the indigenous rebel Zárate Willka, the lynching of left-leaning president Gualberto Villaroel, the last 18th century rebellion of Julián Apaza and Bartolina Sisa, the Water War and Gas War at the dawn of the new millennium, etc; all these are visited as stages in an inexorable process of native liberation. This progression is, however, so familiar to a Bolivian audience that it suggests the film is primarily for export, to garner support abroad for Evo's increasingly embattled position. Why else has it taken so long to produce a film that supports the government position, and why have the communicational and potentially militant possibilities of cinema not been used here as, for example, in Cuba? Support for television and educational media has, similarly, been minimal.

Insurgentes is an occasionally schematic trawl through Bolivian history, exclusively from the Andean indigenous viewpoint, with only the merest element of fictionalization. Its most successful elements are, indeed, the conscientious reconstructions of historical events, with acting kept to a minimum (an exception being the notable Reinaldo Yujra, known for his Sebastián in Sanjinés' tour de force, *The Hidden Nation*). Other historical events, though inherently dramatic, seem stilted and overplayed: the death of President Villaroel at the hands of a mob inflamed by propaganda from the Right is one example, while the execution of Zárate Willka could have been more effectively portrayed with a less redundantly Manichaean treatment. The feeling that this is a film intended for export is backed up by the visual metaphor, late on in the film, of the president in a rising cable car passing the aforementioned rebels on their way down. *Insurgentes* conflates the current process with its perceived precedents, but overlooks flagrant inherent contradictions on the way.

Go to notes page

Notes

1. 1971: published in English by Curbstone Press, Seattle 1989. [return to essay]

Aibileen Clark is the first maid to narrate her story in Tate Taylor's 2011 film *The Help*.
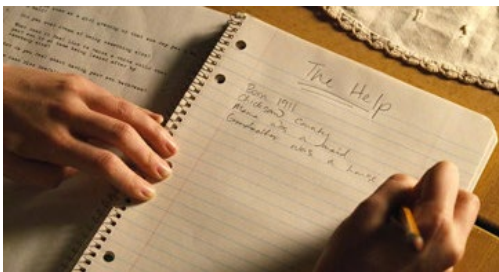
The Help immediately situates the viewer within Skeeter's perspective as she jots down Aibileen's story.

Not helping:
The Help is stuck in the same stereotypes it's supposed to debunk

by Kathryn Fleishman

In the opening sequence of *The Help,* the camera focuses at eye level on the stoic face of a middle-aged black woman in a kitchen, phlegmatically describing the many trials of her life as a maid in Jackson, Mississippi in 1963. The character is Aibileen Clark (Viola Davis), born in Chicksaw County, the daughter of a maid and the granddaughter of a house slave born on the same plantation. As Aibileen speaks, seemingly right to the audience, our still-unseen protagonist, Eugenia "Skeeter" Phelan (Emma Stone) transfers the maid's thoughts into her own shorthand and onto the blank pages of a notebook with her white hands. And in this initial act of "translation," through which director Tate Taylor aligns his viewers with the white Skeeter as she interprets black experience in the Jim Crow South, *The Help* already begins to leave a bad taste in the mouth.[1] [open endnotes in new window]

Aibileen narrates as we get our first glimpse of Skeeter, driving down a dirt road with the radio blasting:

> "The young white ladies of Jackson—oh, lord was they havin' babies. But not Miss Skeeter. No man and no babies."

Young, white, and single, Skeeter Phelan drives freely down a dirt road outside of Jackson, Mississippi.

Unlike her two-dimensional, bridge-playing peers, Skeeter is a college graduate with "no man and no babies," according to Aiby's voice-over.

Unlike her friends, for whom a job is just the "last stop till marriage," this newly minted Ole Miss graduate has *real* dreams. She wants to be "a serious writer." And when she gets her first job at the local paper writing a cleaning advice column, of course she asks her friend's maid Aibileen to tell her what to write, since her own maid Constantine has mysteriously "quit," and naturally Skeeter knows nothing about cleaning. All this is tacitly condoned by the film, which carefully indicates Skeeter as a heroic outsider among her smug, patently racist peers. While the demonic queen bee of the white ladies, Hilly Holbrook (Bryce Dallas Howard) drafts the Home Health Sanitation Initiative to require separate bathrooms for black servants working in white homes ("They carry different diseases than we do," Hilly sneers), Skeeter is morally set apart. *She* thanks the maids when they pour her iced

The young Mrs. Hilly Holbrook "inherits" the services of her maid, Minny Jackson, from her mother, Mrs. Walters.

Hilly drafts a bill, the "Home Health Sanitation Initiative," which will prevent black servants from using the toilets in their employers' homes.

tea and even knows the name of the black man who works at the local soda fountain! And so begins a modern-day racial melodrama.

The Help, which Taylor adapted from Kathryn Stockett's wildly popular 2009 book-club phenomenon of the same name, grossed $26 million during its opening weekend and remained in theaters across the country for 16 weeks, raking in $169 million at the national box office and $211 million worldwide.[2] It also received a Golden Globe and a BAFTA for acting, the AFI Movie of the Year Award, 3 SAG awards, and an Oscar. Though it did not end up winning Best Picture, critics like Ben Child at *The Guardian* considered it *The Artist*'s main contender for that honor at this year's Academy Awards.[3] The city of Jackson's tourism website is advertising "*The Help* Tours" these days. And on the popular website Rotten Tomatoes, the film enjoys an approval rating of 76% among critics and 91% among audiences (an impressive statistic considering those of such recent Oscar winners as *There Will Be Blood* [91%; 84%]and *Black Swan* [88%; 86%]. On IMDb, *The Help* has an audience ranking of 8/10 while *The Artist*'s is 8.2/10).[4] So what's the issue that critics have only *sort of* picked up on, and which audiences hardly seem to notice at all? Why do we generally like *The Help*?

Detroit News' Tom Long praises the film as

> "[r]ich in emotion, rich in history, rich in humor...rich in prejudice, pain and terrible truth, even as it's rich in compassion and courage...an old-fashioned grand yarn of a film, the sort we rarely get these days."[5]

Certainly, the film affects the kind of distancing, even progressive, historical irony we've encountered in so many recent popular meditations on early 1960s United States (think *Mad Men* and its cohorts), creations that try to re-engage cultural sincerity as they mediate a relationship with our fairly-recent past. *The Help* indicates these moments by familiar means: "I guarantee someday they're gon' find out cigarettes'll kill you," Skeeter's boss says, and her own benighted mother makes references to a "cure" for girls who are "havin' unnatural thoughts about girls or women." The problem in *The Help,* though, is that its ironicizing gestures are clumsy and overcompensating, even racist themselves—"old-fashioned," but not in the positive way Long wants to claim. Far from purposive dramatic irony, such flippant slippages of meaning only contribute to the troubling gap between intention and execution in the film's attempt to redress history. (Who can trust the effective use of irony, anyway, in a film where the young "writer" Skeeter sloppily misuses the word? "We love them and they love us, but they can't even use the toilets in our houses. Don't you find that ironic?" she asks.) *The Help* fails to challenge us *now,* instead creating an easy, rather than troubling, space, in which we can laugh at the "pastness" of our past, especially its prejudices.

Skeeter gets a job writing the "Miss Myrna" column at the *Jackson Journal,* where the editor-in-chief surmises that someday, cigarettes will be blamed for causing health problems.

Skeeter's typewriter magically "translates" the maids' stories from black to white.

Manohla Dargis observes in *The New York Times,*

"Like the novel, the movie is about ironing out differences and letting go of the past and anger."[6]

The facility of *The Help* indeed lies in this ironing out—or even ironizing out. It is a *comforting* racial melodrama in the grand tradition, which falls back on a wise, romanticized group of "Mammy" figures to continually reassert our current knowingness about just how bad racism was—and certainly *isn't* now. Along with Aiby, whose tragic past haunts her, it is Skeeter's childhood maid Constantine, fired after 23 years of service, who is sacrificed on the altar of the melodrama. Constantine, as we see in hazy porch-side flashbacks, has "raised" Skeeter alongside her own daughter. But when Skeeter finds out that her own mother fired Constantine to save face at a home luncheon in front of the visiting Daughters of America, we are treated to a hold shot on her young, white, trembling face as she cries, "You broke her heart!" As if to suggest that melodramatic expressivity could absorb the guilt of this "murder," Skeeter's mother covers her own mouth and moans, "I'm sorrrryyyy!"
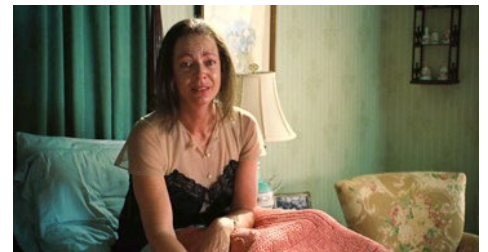

The Phelans' maid, Constantine, is a central melodramatic figure in the film.

"She raised me!" Skeeter insists to her mother of their former maid Constantine.
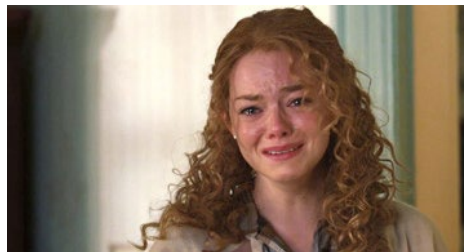
In a moment of pathos, Skeeter confronts her mother about unjustly firing Constantine.

Mrs. Phelan wails a series of apologies – to Skeeter and to herself.

Television coverage of a Medgar Evers speech precedes the film's vague portrayal of his murder.

In Constantine's death, as well as references to murders, physicalized sicknesses, and beatings of black characters, we get over and again in *The Help* the "spectacle of racialized bodily suffering" that critic Linda Williams locates as a key release point in U.S. racial melodrama.[7] *The Help* also seeks to comfort us in our present by grafting itself consciously to history. It incorporates actual TV coverage of Medgar Evers' speeches and murder, a real *LIFE* magazine cover, images of Jim Crow signs reminiscent of Eudora Welty's photos of Jackson in the 1930s, and an early shot of a 'Colored' back-stair entrance to a movie theater which uncannily restages a famous Marion Post Wolcott snapshot from Belzoni, Mississippi in 1939.[8] By putting Aiby in the dark, confused streets of Jackson amongst other vague, black, running figures on the night of Evars' death, too, *The Help* presumes its own seamless suture with history and makes its own historicizing claim about the "pastness" of racism that is all the more disturbing because it purports to be so "real."

Shots from *The Help* like this one, resembling a Marion Post Wolcott photo of Belzoni, Mississippi, fictionally restage well-known images of the Jim Crow South.
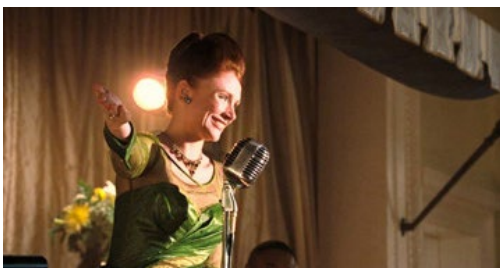

The Help's blurry, unclear depiction of Aiby (at left) amidst the chaos of the night of Medgar Evers' murder.

Discomfort with *The Help* seems to seep through the language of a number of critics, only to be reflexively *corrected*. Tom Long, the critic who loved *The Help's* "richness," admits that it "does rely on stock characters—the wise underclass; the country bumpkin; the pure racist and the social climber," but this is all fine because "in Mississippi, the epicenter of American racism in 1963, such characters likely existed."[9]

Dana Stevens, writing in *Slate,* complains that *The Help* lies within a "tradition of feel-good fables about black-white relations in America... in which institutional racism takes a backseat to the personal enlightenment of one white character," yet she ends by conceding that "[t]he story simplifies and reduces the civil rights movement, yes, but at least it's *about* it."[10]

David Denby of the *The New Yorker* includes at least one substantial critique of the film and its source material in his piece "Maids of Honor": "the insistence of the novelist Kathryn Stockett... to place, in effect, a version of herself in a heroic and dangerous period, doing there what she actually did in a time of safety."[11] Still, for Denby, *The Help* is, overall, "a good, fresh, morally complicated story, lusciously photographed, with many touching moments," and, as he concludes, "parts of it are so moving and well acted that any objections to what's second-rate seem to matter less as the movie goes on."[12]

What all this seems to say is that we do know better, but we wish we didn't. If we did, we would have to confront contemporary race problems in the United States. Instead, *The Help* delivers us a lushly costumed and well-acted version of our "history" as a kind of cathexis point for any enduring discomfort surrounding race, which we can then erase from our moral present. Sigfried Kracauer, writing in the 1920s, scathingly critiqued these kinds of films, which he said were made for "little shopgirls," that sought to turn a profit by introducing major social issues, but ultimately reinforcing a bourgeois sense of comfort with the "way things are."[13] He writes that "[f]ilms are the mirror of the prevailing society... they hint at subversive points of view without exploring them" and "reaffirm the ruling system," so that "the more incorrectly [films] present the surface of things, the more correct they become and the more clearly they mirror the secret mechanism of society."[14]

Kracauer's tone, which deliberately maligns the intellects of the women he describes, nevertheless hits upon a formulaic set of production values much like the whitewashing, superficial liberalism of *The Help*. Rather than trouble its audience, *The Help* simply reinforces what we'd like to believe—the dominant ideology of our own progressiveness—even as it conceals evidence of itself as a fiction through its false sutures to "history." As a result, the film feels a little like Skeeter's mother gazing at her black maid Constantine through a screen door after firing her, knowing what she's doing is wrong and shutting the door in the face of this knowledge anyway.

Mrs. Phelan coldly ignores Constantine (and her better judgment) after firing her.

The Help is rife with toilet humor. Here, Hilly's "Yard of the Month" is transformed when Skeeter makes a "typo" in the Junior League newsletter.

Hilly graciously thanks "the help" at the holiday benefit for "Starving African Children."

A group of black female prisoners reads the juiciest bits of the anonymously written book *The Help* toward the end of the film.

Kracauer snarkily paints the swaths of sentimental films released in the early twentieth century with a wide brush, calling them expressions of a society "full of pity" that

> "wants to express its emotional excess so as to soothe its conscience... The little shopgirls gain unexpected insights into the misery of mankind and the goodness from above."[15]

This description seems to fit *The Help* like a crisp white debutante glove, not only because it describes the script's myopic white protagonists, but because the film itself seems to believe quite sincerely in its own anti-racism. Among its distancing ironies is a scene at a charity auction, at which Hilly thanks "the help" and claims that the "Starving African Children" cause is one she "is sure is dear to their hearts as well." While this plays "knowingly" with whites conflating Africans and African-Americans in the "past," *The Help* actually *reinforces* a number of racist stereotypes, too. Among these is criminality—at the film's close, the only black readers of Skeeter's text are the crudely tough inmates of a women's prison, who read the most profane sentences of the book aloud and dissolve in peals of laughter.

The film presents, too, an almost conspiratorially close "black community," in which "they all know each other." Aibileen mentions casually, as though it were a foregone conclusion, that she knew Skeeter's maid Constantine from her "church circle." Later, when the maids gather after an incidence of repression to volunteer for interviews with Skeeter, Henry the soda jerk (whom we've already seen chatting to Aibileen at the back of the bus) whispers slyly to Skeeter, "You best head on over to Miss Aibileen's house—now." Problematically, though, the film undermines this same community by confining its depiction of black home life to single mothers in close, shabby, cabin-like interiors, refusing to posit them within a larger, more inter-connective social structure.

Henry, the local soda jerk, tells Skeeter to head over to Aibileen's house right away when another injustice makes more of the local maids ready to talk.

The cramped homes of overburdened mothers comprise most of the film's portrayal of black domestic life.

One of the more disappointing racialized moments of the film is the double serving of literalized "humble pie" that the plucky Minny (Octavia Spencer) serves to Hilly after getting fired. Though the moment is delivered with impeccable dramatic irony (we know what's happening *just* before Hilly does), it's a shame that the scene becomes the central "joke" of the film, as well as the characters' security against Hilly in their anonymous publication of the book, because it's both grotesque and tasteless. Indeed, although it is a "comic" moment, when Minny vaguely alludes to it on the phone with Aibileen, she calls it the "terrible awful" and bursts into tears: "And now I ain't never gonna get no job again."

The "terrible awful" with the pie isn't just "unconvincing," as Denby would have it—it's bestializing.[16] When Minny resorts to this scatological revenge, she makes an abject, nonverbal act the "natural"—and only—response to injustice by black characters in the film before Skeeter comes to the rescue.

Minny's "special pie" for Hilly is a dish best served cold.

Hilly has a second slice of Minny's "terrible awful."

Aiby briefly stands up to Hilly, calling her "a

Unlike the many historical protests and sit-ins led by blacks all over the South, Minny's petty fictional revenge leads nowhere and articulates nothing. Instead, she and the other "Mammies" need Skeeter to lead them in an intelligible protest, translating their inarticulate rage into comprehensible, whitewashed language. As comedians Kenan Thompson and Seth Meyer quipped on *Saturday Night Live's* "Weekend Update" last October, *The Help* is

> "a film that teaches black women that if you work hard enough and hum loud enough, Emma Stone will come and save you."[17]

One wonders, in fact, why the maids need Skeeter at all, when Aibileen virtually reads her crafted stories aloud to Skeeter from her prayer journal and claims authorship at the film's close: "I been told I'm a pretty good writer—already sold a lot of books." The answer is that we, the audience, are expected to need Skeeter. In

the film's opening credits, we first see Aibileen through Skeeter's eyes and watch the film's title written in Skeeter's hand, so that, regardless of race, our experience as viewers is profoundly mediated by a white protagonist. We are safer, the film seems to suggest, because we only identify with black characters *via* Skeeter, and at a distance, purging our pity about the "past" without admitting the continuing power of racism in this country. Even the film's soundtrack seems to buttress this. The revolutionary characters (like Skeeter) get Bob Dylan for their heroic acts, while Hilly Holbrook's breakdown occurs as she is trapped in Chubby Checkers' cyclical lyrics, expressing *her* (and not our!) inability to progress with history:

> "Twist again, like we did last summer, let's twist again, like we did last year."

The film's moralizing tone strangely perpetuates the very superficial, gossipy behaviors it purports to criticize initially. When Skeeter splits "the worst advance Ms. Stein had ever seen" with the 13 maids and gets her dream job, her mother "reforms." She sticks up for Skeeter by telling a sweaty and blemished Hilly (whose suffering is signified by her diminishing physical attractiveness and whose infected mouth is evidence of ingesting Minny's pie) to "get her raggedy ass" off the Phelan's porch "before we all get one of those disgusting things on our lips."

Hilly Holbrook appears, sweaty and blemished, on the Phelans' porch to exact revenge on Skeeter for writing the book.

Mrs. Phelan steps in to denigrate Hilly's appearance, kick her off the property, and express just how proud she is of Skeeter's "courage."

Mrs. Walters is deranged, but she's also the only one sane enough to see that the eponymous book in *The Help* is mere scandal.

Rather than dispel Hilly's racialized terror that she will be infected if she shares her household toilet with a maid, here the contact between her body and Minny's does leave an infectious trace. With apparently unintentional irony, *The Help* actualizes the very "ridiculous" fear it intends to satirize. The same ingestive grotesquerie that dishes up tragic irony in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* or keen satire in Swift's "A Modest Proposal" is deployed here in the trivial, bathetic, and blinkered service of humiliating the white villainess through shameful contact with a black female body.

But never fear! Skeeter gets moral permission to go to New York from the noble, unemployed Aibileen and the lucky Minny, who has "a job for life" at Celia Foote's (a job that has also somehow inspired her to leave her abusive husband). Ultimately, the logic of the film turns in on itself here—as Skeeter moans that she "can't just leave you two here," Aiby and Minny insist that "[s]ometimes bad things happen, and ain't nothin' you can do about it," totally contradicting the film's ostensible message. Anyway, Skeeter needs a husband, and Minny potently reminds us, she

> "ain't never gon' find another man in this town… [s]o don't walk your white butt to New York, *run* it."

They conclude by imploring her: "Go find your life, *Miss Skeeter*," chillingly preserving a hierarchizing structure of nomenclature, as well as representing a tacit acceptance on Aiby and Minny's part that *their* lives cannot, and need not, progress.

After teaching Celia how to cook and properly run a house, Johnny Foote tells Minny she has

Although Skeeter leaves behind a community of poor, unemployed black women as well as a series of shattered relationships and a sick mother, we're reminded again that it's all okay, because she's forging the path of the good, white, feminist American career woman. As Kracauer wrote of a much earlier film, it "recovers its

rosy-cheeked smile immediately," sending us off with a happy ending for our white heroine and dispensing with the nagging problems of the racialized victim-heroes:

> "The little shopgirls were worried; now they can breathe easy again."[18]

Unfortunately, though, the distasteful pie at the center of *The Help* could be a metonym for the whole film—while Taylor and Stockett sell you on what Long calls a "rich slice of history," you can't help but feel, in consuming it, that it might be totally full of—well. You know.
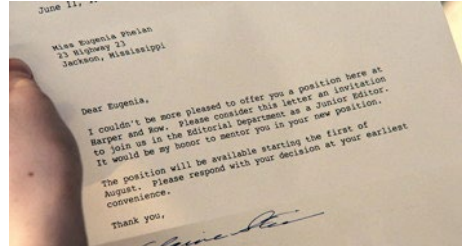
Once her book is a success, Skeeter receives a letter from Ms. Stein with a job offer from Harper & Row.

Minny and Aiby send "Miss Skeeter" off to New York with their blessing: "Go find your life."

Go to notes page

JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Notes

1. *The Help*, directed by Tate Taylor (2011; Burbank, CA: Dreamworks &Walt Disney Studios, 2012) DVD. [return to page 1]

2. Kathryn Stockett, *The Help* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2009). Internet Movie Database, "The Help." Online: available http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1454029/business

3. Internet Movie Database, "The Help." Online: available http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1454029/awards. Ben Child, "The Help Spurred on to Oscars by SAG Awards Triumph," *The Guardian* (January 30, 2012). Online: available http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2012/jan/30/ the-help-sag-awards-triumph

4. "Visit Jackson" website, online: available http://www.visitjackson.com. Rotten Tomatoes, *The Help*. Online: available http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the_help/

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6. Manohla Dargis, "'The Maids' Now Have Their Say" (Review of *The Help*), *The New York Times* (August 9, 2011). Online: available http://movies.nytimes.com/2011/08/10/movies/ the-help-spans-two-worlds-white-and-black-review.html

7. Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011) xiv.

8. Elizabeth Abel, *Signs of the Times: The Visual Politics of Jim Crow* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010) 226, 233.

9. Long.

10. Dana Stevens, "*The Help:* A feel-good film that feels kind of icky" (Review

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http://www.newyorker.com/arts/reviews/film/the_help_taylor

12. David Denby, "Maids of Honor (Review of *The Help*), *The New Yorker* (August 15, 2011). Online: available
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13. Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament* (Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995) 291.

14. Kracauer 291-2.

15. Kracauer 295.

16. Denby.

17. "Weekend Update," *Saturday Night Live* (October 1, 2011). Online: available nbc.com

18. Kracauer 304.

Fine, passive receptacles without a purpose – the heritage items in *Pirates of the Caribbean* operate as metaphors for the role of the aristocratic white woman herself.

Pirates heroine Elizabeth Swann mourns in her bridal wear for the romantic happily-ever-after that in the course of the narrative reveals itself to be an impossibility.

Swann descends the stairs in the first film, the work required in this performance of femininity as spectacle (Mulvey, 1975) having been revealed to us in prior scenes.

English ladies to liberators? How *Pirates of the Caribbean* and *Alice in Wonderland* mobilize aristocratic white femininity

by Kendra Marston

A privileged young woman used to a life of voluminous skirts, constricting corsets, demure waltzes and lavish ceremonial occasions longs to live a different life far far away. Servants dote on her. People admire her for her charm, poise and sense of duty to her elders while potential suitors who long to possess her as a wife covet her ethereal beauty. She is the epitome of aristocratic white womanhood, as delicate and fragile as the fine bone china cups from which she leisurely consumes her tea on summer afternoons. And yet she knows that the very things for which she is admired only result from a lifetime of carefully constructed, socially enforced performances that will inevitably stifle her deepest desires. These desires for passionate love, for exploration, to be able to see the world and act in it are in danger of being permanently suppressed due to an impending marriage, an act which represents the ultimate white death (Dyer, 1997) for the English lady who dares to dream that she can be both seen and heard. The clock ticks.

Such a scene should sound familiar given that this kind of female character has made her appearance in a number of recent Hollywood blockbusters, including those that I plan to discuss in this article – the *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise and Tim Burton's *Alice in Wonderland*.[1][open endnotes in new window] The films are narratives of action, adventure and spectacle, allowing these initially stifled female protagonists to enter into fantastical spaces, mingling with and learning from the otherworldly characters they find. The successful navigation of and partial assimilation into this fantastical space liberates the young woman from her previously oppressive existence by providing her with a magical playground in which to try on a myriad of new identities, eventually freeing her from high society's restrictive gender norms and behavioral rules. However, these films are not just about liberating heritage white women, but about

Elizabeth Swann's feminist liberation is facilitated by her liberation of the pirates who must learn to look up to and follow her as leader.

Alice faces the expectant gaze of high society at her engagement party in Tim Burton's *Alice in Wonderland* ...

... but manages to find inner strength and form her own path through the act of restoring Underland's White Queen to power.

white women who fight against the oppression of those in the fantastical space en route to, and indeed as a means of, gaining their own freedom.

Thus it transpires that the female protagonist has entered the space not by accident but due to a higher purpose – the journey is a manifestation of her destiny. The films then produce narratives of double oppression and double liberation via a problematic alignment of gender-based and, I will argue, race-based discrimination. In these films the hegemony of white patriarchy is critiqued and yet upheld via a certain compromise, a compromise identifiable through the mobilization of aristocratic white femininity. The films introduce a familiar heroine and heritage setting and then work to empower her via a process by which she abandons her upper class white feminine identity. Foregrounded, however, is that the heroine's adoption and conquering of "Otherness" allows her to bypass previous gender limitations and expectations. The problematic result is that what appears transgressive or empowering from a feminist perspective can in many ways be complicit with white power structures. These narratives of "white struggle," I suggest, are a dominant way in which contemporary popular culture negotiates the meaning of feminism.

The *Pirates* trilogy of films[2] follows the adventures of Governor's daughter Elizabeth Swann (Keira Knightley) and her love interest Will Turner (Orlando Bloom) as they navigate and conquer a number of threats on the high seas ranging from cursed pirates to a dastardly agent of the East India Trading Company hell-bent on controlling the Caribbean via the dispatching of pirate rivals. Aiding and abetting Turner and Swann is the lovable yet morally questionable Captain Jack Sparrow (Johnny Depp) whose brilliant schemes and obscure motives provide the backbone of the series. Elizabeth, initially an object of ridicule for the pirates, eventually gains their respect in a key incident, when after becoming the Pirate King, she leads them into a victorious battle that protects their right to sail. She is able to marry Will but because of a debt he owes to the Flying Dutchman is only able to see him one day a year. Nevertheless, because she has his heart (literally) she can control the seas on which he journeys. While *Pirates* critiques colonial authority, the films suggest that the pirates could not unite for their cause without the aid of the moral white woman.

Burton's take on *Alice in Wonderland* presents an unhappy 19-year-old Alice (Mia Wasikowska) about to be married off to a man she finds abhorrent. Alice however is tormented by dreams of a place called Wonderland, and at her engagement party, she falls down a rabbit hole to find herself in the familiar dreamscape. The characters she meets there seem to recognize her from her apparent last visit as a little girl; they debate as to whether or not she is the *real* Alice, sent to liberate them from the bloody reign of the Red Queen (Helena Bonham Carter). While unsure at first, Alice soon comes to realize that her destiny is to slay the Red Queen's jabberwocky and aid in restoring the White Queen (Anne Hathaway) to power. As a result Alice finds the courage to return to England, reject her suitor, and further her father's work through her ideas for the expansion of trade routes.

While these films are my main objects of study, I will also refer from time to time to the 1997 spectacle *Titanic,* the film about the doomed

ocean liner and the equally doomed love affair of passengers Jack (Leonardo Di Caprio) and Rose (Kate Winslet). Rose, although she never enters an alternate world, provides an important precursor to the characters of Elizabeth and Alice in that her journey from aristocratic white femininity to social liberation and subsequent empowerment is enabled by her association with the bohemian Jack and his Irish friends below decks – in short, due to her acceptance by those her social class would deem unsuitable "Others."[3]

Whiteness in culture and as filmic sign

Before beginning a textual analysis of the films, it is first necessary to briefly introduce some of the key scholarship on what Ruth Frankenberg (1993) has termed "the social construction of whiteness" and how identity comes to be formed through its various beliefs and practices. What interests me here is not only the white body in culture but in particular how whiteness can operate as a symbol on screen—the threat of corruption to the bordered civilized body by the dark and dangerous hordes provides fuel for countless Hollywood narratives.[4] However, in addition, the movie screen may well provide a space where fantasies of transgression from idealized models of whiteness can play out under the guise of a narrative, or indeed a character, that appears to raise different questions. The story of whiteness can *hide* behind the story of (for instance) gender not only in a film script but also through the construction of Hollywood celebrities, whose appeal may lie in a foregrounded liminality that is gender-based but is also reliant on race-based mythologies. In cinema studies, such theoretical work has been carried out at the intersection of scholarship studying whiteness and that analyzing the star image. This work best introduces some of the key themes of this article.

In his study of the representational regime of whiteness in cinema, Richard Dyer, pointing out that whiteness secures its dominance by seeming to be nothing in particular, hypothesizes that in an analysis of white power,

> "whiteness needs to be made strange" (1997, p. 10).

Whiteness is an empowering position precisely because it proclaims to be a non-raced category, because it can "speak for the commonality of humanity" while "raced people can only speak for their race" (Dyer, 1997, p. 2). In an analysis of Christian writings and iconography, Dyer goes on to explore the concept of a split between mind and body, with the body often regarded as inferior, the site of temptation and of sexual urge. The white man must strive to transcend his body through his spirit, his intellect, and his yearning for the heavens, while black people are seen as primitive, ruled by the body, unable to transcend. The ideal white woman is "non-physical, spiritual, ethereal," her model the Virgin Mary who Dyer points out is

> "a pure vessel for reproduction unsullied by the dark drives that reproduction entails" (p. 29).

Such repression and denial in the name of "pure" reproduction and civilization results in an absence of life for white people, and so

Richard Dyer points out in *White* that the model for white womanhood is the Virgin Mary.

Francis Ford Coppola's *Dracula*. Dyer argues that the concept of whites as deathlike has been given representation in Hollywood film through figures such as the vampire and zombie.

whiteness can become associated with a lack of corporeality and ultimately death. Dyer argues that the idea of whites as both death-like and bringers of death to others is often given representation in Hollywood cinema and can be seen in the figures of the vampire or zombie who cannot control the implicitly sexual and therefore destructive desire to feed off their victims.

However it has also been argued that because of their privileged position in the racial hierarchy, whites are more easily able to imitate and "perform" the Other, thus being able to travel along a continuum of whiteness (Davy, 1995, p. 191). Nowhere does this point seem more evident than in the realm of popular culture where white performers repeatedly appropriate and commodify race in order to ensure their ongoing "life" as stars, an accusation made against celebrities such as Madonna (see hooks, 1992). Gwendolyn Audrey Foster has pointed to the example of Hollywood star Mae West, who while often hailed as a feminist figure for her sexual assertiveness and her refusal to be a passive plaything for males, simultaneously "dragged" male sexual desire, black women and gay men in her musicality, body language and manner of speaking (Foster, 2003, p. 36). Foster questions if West performs a "white blackness" in order to contest stereotypes about both women and blackness, given that both constitute a problematic for whiteness in that they signify negation. However, she concludes that while West's performances transgress modes of normative female heterosexuality, it is unfortunate that these moments of transgression "come on the back of black femininity" (p, 40).

Modern-day stars too may reap success from on- and off-screen transgressive performances that destabilize notions of the civilized white body. Sean Redmond argues that stardom itself is connected to ideal whiteness, in that stars are supposedly the chosen ones, made in God's image, beautiful, pure and heaven sent (2007, p. 264). Consider MGM's famous tagline, saying the studio contained "more stars than there are in heaven." These celestial beings however are always capable of falling from grace because while posited as the ultimate in spirit they are of course also flesh and blood. Thus Redmond argues that stars can be constructed to wrestle with the contradictions of the extraordinary/ordinary paradox of whiteness, analyzing the persona of *Titanic* star Kate Winslet in order to illustrate his hypothesis.

Winslet has all the physical markers of the English Rose archetype

with her pale translucent skin, full lips, and mane of hair. She is associated with English heritage pictures and literary adaptations, therefore situating her as a "quality" artistic actress. Winslet's star text however also situates her as the quintessential girl next door. She smokes, drinks and refuses to conform to Hollywood glamor ideals, particularly the ideal that commands extreme slenderness. Redmond points out that heritage films are perfect star vehicles for Winslet because they involve narrative tensions of desire and restraint (p. 271). In films such as *Sense and Sensibility* and *Titanic,* he argues, Winslet's character is restrained by societal expectations for the upper class white feminine. Yet she longs to escape, to be in her body, to desire, love and be loved. Winslet therefore is a star who can travel along the continuum of whiteness.

Of course, given that whiteness secures dominance through its apparent absence, Winslet's star story and the films in which she appears do not seem to be about whiteness at all. Instead, they appear to be about feminism and liberation from gender oppression. When Winslet in the press foregrounds the fact that she has been successful in Hollywood despite not conforming to beauty ideals, she comes across as a champion and spokesperson for diversity in societal views of female attractiveness. Films like those mentioned are about women desiring to see and act in the world, to do what men do, to be admired for more than their physical appearance and decorative costuming.

The story of whiteness then is hidden behind the story of gender. Winslet, like West, may be hailed as a feminist figure for her performative transgressions of "appropriate" feminine behavior without a full consideration of how these transgressions are facilitated. It could be argued that Keira Knightley of *Pirates of the Caribbean* fame is another such star, made up to wrestle with these constraints placed on white femininity. Like Winslet, Knightley is associated with the heritage narrative and commonly plays women who break the rules of this white patriarchal space. She is an unruly and disruptive figure, the embodiment of white ideological rupture.

Feminist critical writing on the current popular culture landscape has argued that today's postmodern and postfeminist age has resulted in a certain nostalgia for whiteness in a time when feminist and black politics fade away and become clichés of political correctness (McRobbie, 2009, p. 9). This nostalgia for whiteness can perhaps be seen in the renewed popularity of heritage cinema and television, which has a tendency to focus on aristocratic Victorian or Edwardian families. As Andrew Higson points out, there is an ideological tension between the narrative drive of the films, which may contain a critique

based on feminist or socialist principles, and their image, which "fetishises the well-tended finery" of its setting (2003, p. 77). Antje Ascheid has explored this ideological splitting in relation to the feminist credentials of the heritage picture, pointing out that these films promote liberation and sexual self discovery while at the same time they romanticize the era as a time of romantic abandon, something not possible in the cynical here and now (Ascheid, 2006).

The arguments made above do not correlate directly to films such as *Pirates* and *Alice* (as opposed to *Titanic)* because of the narrative split between the framing narrative in historical heritage space which sets the stories into play and the fantastical space, where the real romance, action and drama take place. The "color," as such, is in the journey rather than in the initial setting. However, it is necessary to briefly highlight these critical viewpoints on heritage cinema in order to display how these two films invoke and yet manipulate the above tropes. The films introduce the familiar heroine and heritage setting and then work to empower her via a process by which she abandons her upper class white feminine identity and the possibility of romance. The "romantic abandon," which here translates as freedom rather than love, is only possible in a space which at first seems almost anarchic and at least certainly borderless, non-civilized and decidedly non-white.

Downton Abbey is a recent television show which illustrates Andrew Higson's hypothesis that the heritage narrative both engages in a critique of the dominant ideologies of the era and fetishises the aristocratic setting at the level of mise-en-scene.

Teenage Alice is set up in opposition to her mother through her espousing of feminist values within the confined space of the carriage.

Alice's mother is shocked at her daughter's refusal to wear stockings

Death and melancholy: introducing Elizabeth and Alice

When we first meet the female protagonists of *Pirates* and *Alice,*they are clearly unhappy with their respective domestic arrangements. The camera wedges itself between Alice Kingsleigh and her mother, capturing the former's bored expression as she travels in a carriage to attend what unbeknownst to her is her engagement party. Their opposed values are almost immediately set up when Alice tells her mother she does not agree with the clothing choices required of young women, saying furtively that she is against stockings and later commenting that a "corset is like a codfish." After she has to dance with Hamish, the man who plans to propose to her, Alice giggles when she reveals her vision of men in dresses and ladies in trousers and then wonders what it would be like to fly. Hamish, visibly baffled by her chatter, attempts to groom Alice for her future position as passive wife by telling her that if ever in doubt about what to say then she should remain silent.

When we meet the adult Elizabeth Swann in *Pirates,* she is similarly preparing to attend a lavish ceremony that may double as an engagement celebration. James Norrington (Jack Davenport), about to be promoted to the rank of Commodore, is expected to honor the occasion by proposing. Although Elizabeth can see that Norrington is "a fine man, what any woman should dream of marrying," she clearly loves the blacksmith Will Turner, a state of affairs noticed by her maid. Like Alice, Elizabeth's entrapment is signified through the clothing she must wear for the occasion. As she changes into a corset brought back from London by her father, Elizabeth gasps and exclaims,

> "Women in London must have learned not to breathe!"

The corset here denies female corporeality, while Alice's stockings work to hide her body in a manner fitting for a young woman who cannot incite the desire of one not her betrothed. Costume here works in accordance with the idealized function of white womanhood. Additionally, the oppression of women in both films is primarily linked to costume and bodily constriction. In the fantastical space, costume changes have an added significance. When women can wear trousers and thus run, jump and most importantly fight, the costume change automatically is read as empowering because it shows the protagonists have been able to transcend the bodily limitations imposed on her in the primary space.

Elizabeth and Alice both dream of being able to choose their destinies but cannot due to a patriarchal system that sees them as objects to be looked at and exchanged. They will attend the ceremony in all their finery in wait for the moment that will cement their futures as wives of high-ranking gentlemen. Nevertheless their dreams of freedom are given certain validity, a certain *possibility,* because the fantastical space that will liberate them in the course of the narrative is already present in their subconscious. The

Lord Hamish attempts to correct Alice's wayward femininity during a dance, the success of which depends on adherence to strict gender roles.

Elizabeth Swann is suffocated by the prospect of a life without adventure and marriage to a man she does not love, here signified through the over-tight lacing of a corset.

Costume changes in the fantastical space allow the young women more physical and spatial mobility and thus can be read as aiding in their feminist empowerment.

heroines cannot fit into the society in which they were raised not only because they find the feminine role constricting but because they are haunted by the possibility of another realm that may offer them something different.

Sigmund Freud (1917) in his essay "Mourning and Melancholia" aims to differentiate between these two states of grief by hypothesizing that while the mourner eventually overcomes his/her grief as the libido is withdrawn from the lost object, in the melancholic the libido becomes withdrawn into the ego and is not transferred to a new object. As such, the ego identifies with the lost object, the loss of the object equating to a loss in the ego. Freud observes that the typical melancholic appears self-reproaching while displaying a lack of interest in the surrounding world and an inability to love.

Therefore, Elizabeth and Alice's melancholy state, the presence of Underland and the pirate world in the psyche, corresponds to their lack of "life," i.e. their white death. As protagonists, they have the task to free themselves of the tyranny of the lost object by discovering its meaning. As Freud notes, people suffering from melancholy often do not know consciously what has been lost or the *significance* of what has been lost. The re-entry into the fantastical space marks the beginning of an urgent struggle of the ego against the intruding object. In the films, the heroines Elizabeth and Alice triumph when they conquer the object and simultaneously realize the significance of the space as integral to their liberation from the stifling white feminine position.

Complaining about Alice's visual presentation in the film, *News of the World* critic Robbie Collin stated that she "is not a heroine – she looks like she's ON heroin." Indeed, Alice's thin build, chalky white skin, and darkly rimmed eyes coupled with a sulky melancholy demeanor is strongly reminiscent of the 1990s "heroin chic" aesthetic popularized in the fashion world by designers such as Calvin Klein and models like Kate Moss. Tin Burton, it should be noted, frequently employs such a look in order to convey his characters' lonely outsider status. They often appear almost as ghosts, sleepwalking in societies that demand performances from them that they cannot quite deliver.

Alice's appearance in the film seemingly comes from her troubled sleep patterns. She cannot get a good night's sleep because ever since she was a small child she has been plagued by the same dream. This repetitive dream is the familiar Carroll story where Alice falls down a rabbit hole and has to navigate her way through Wonderland. In making these observations of Alice here – namely that she is bored, melancholy, and reminiscent of the "heroin chic" trend – I am reminded of Angela McRobbie's analysis of the popular fashion image. McRobbie notes that models in these images are commonly stick thin and offer a limited range of facial expressions from boredom to disdain and most often exhibit "an air of indifference and melancholia" (2009, p. 100). She states that while the fashion photograph offers a fantasy of freedom and escape from gender subordination, this is offset not only by reminders of phallic power in the image but also the exhaustion and melancholia written on the faces of the models. McRobbie hypothesizes that the object of loss in these images is feminism, which according to her must now be disavowed, with the fashion shot articulating an

> "institutionalized madness which accrues from the impossibility of femininity" (p. 110).

Alice occupies a state of melancholy, haunted by her lost object 'Wonderland' which is both her destiny and past, the source of her liberating potential and personal liberation.

The presentation of Alice in the film is similar to the heroin chic aesthetic popularised in the nineties through models such as Kate Moss.

Alice has been haunted by dreams of Wonderland since her first visit as a small child and yet is unaware of what has been lost or how it can be found.

Alice recognizes femininity as a performance, which is shown primarily through her disdain for typically feminine clothing. Although the clothing, like femininity, could potentially be taken on and off, nevertheless society expects Alice to embrace the fashions that everybody else does. Her engagement party is supposed to be a celebratory occasion but it also takes place as a means to ensure that she is set on the right path. Prior to Hamish's proposal, various guests set out to scare Alice into complying with the proposal by reminding her that beauty doesn't last and that she could end up mad and alone like her aunt. Alice perceives her performance as at odds with who she wants to be but cannot express her dissatisfaction in a way which will result in a positive outcome. So it is that Alice has an air of indifference and melancholia.

Her dreams of Wonderland however provide her with a clue as to how to go about her emancipation. Wonderland is Alice's lost object and the source of her melancholia. It is a metaphorical symbol for feminism in that it signifies the means through which Alice can gain liberation from the stifling feminine position. However, although Wonderland exists as Alice's subconscious, the story also fully realizes it as an exotic nation complete with its own government and cultural identity. If she uses Wonderland as a tool for feminist gains, on her journey, Alice also has a mission to fix and know the Other.

A melancholy that exhibits itself in a similar way haunts Elizabeth Swann in *Pirates*. The film opens with a young Elizabeth accompanying her father Captain Swann (Jonathan Pryce), Mr. Gibbs (Kevin McNally), and Commodore Norrington on a sailing mission. While journeying, the group come across a flaming ship and rescue a young boy clinging to debris amidst the water. Elizabeth discovers that the boy, Will Turner, is wearing a pirate medallion and removes it from his possession to allow him a better chance of being taken in and cared for by her family. Although young Elizabeth professes that it "would be rather exciting to meet a pirate," the others on board do not share her opinion, with Norrington informing her that pirates are "vile, dissolute creatures" who should all be hanged. The script immediately sets up Elizabeth as having markedly different views from most British inhabitants of Port Royal because she views pirates as exciting and interesting rather than dangerous, and because she protects Will who very likely is a pirate's child.

We first are introduced to adult Elizabeth on the morning of Commodore Norrington's promotion ceremony. The camera trains on her face in close up as she awakens, startled from a dream that we take to be the above scene from her past. We also discover that she keeps Will's pirate medallion in a small drawer by her bedside and so come to know it as an object of special significance. Like Alice, Elizabeth dreams of the possibility of another world briefly encountered as a small child, and also like Alice she's desperately unhappy performing the femininity required of her in the real world. Her brief encounter with piracy hints at the possibility of a romantic future with Will, but also of a romantic entanglement with racial otherness which could liberate her not only from oppressive gender norms but also from the oppressive whiteness that governs these norms.

Alice's memories. Time is running out for Alice to take up arms and cement her place in Wonderland's mythology.

Elizabeth protects Will's identity by removing his pirate medallion. The act operates as a precursor for her future role as a protector of the pirate way of life.

Elizabeth dreams of her first encounter with piracy as her marriage to Commodore Norrington looms ...

A model for Elizabeth and Alice might come from the film *Titanic,* whose female character Rose connotes this struggle over aristocratic white femininity and its pitfalls through her corporeal presentation. Rose's skin is porcelain, death-like, but this is offset by a mane of vibrant, unnaturally red hair. Red hair, as Amanda Third argues, operates as a powerful visual signifier in Anglo cultures. An ambivalent figure, the red-headed woman is fiery, hot-tempered and headstrong but can also be cool, calculated and cold-blooded. Red-headed women are objects of desire but are also to be treated with caution as they

> "mark the outer limits of culturally acceptable female behaviour" (Third, 2006, p. 239).

However, red-headedness is also a racial signifier associated with those of Celtic origin, primarily Irishness. Third points out that the red hair of the Irish was singled out by the English as evidence of their "otherness" in the absence of a difference in skin color. It marked the Celts out as inferior and so justified colonization by the English (p. 221). Red-heads, concludes Third, are ambivalent figures not only because they threaten the boundaries of appropriate female behavior but also because they threaten colonial order.

Therefore, Rose's hair color signifies on two levels. It represents her passionate, fiery nature which opposes imminent white death (signaled by her skin tone) brought on by the feminine role society requires she play, and it represents her connection with Irishness, the ethnic group which will aid in her liberation from oppression. Rose is not ideally feminine *or* ideally white. It is important to stress however that although Rose's hair suggests she is biologically (read authentically) Irish, both Elizabeth and Alice are at the level of the body coded as "pristinely" white. They have a special *connection* with a magical ethnicity that eventually allows them to be accepted by another group without compromising the privileges that come from being white, a matter which I will now go on to explore.

Representing the magical world

Neither Elizabeth nor Alice enter the magical world on purpose, rather they fall into it. This fall, a metaphorical tumble from the old world's confinement occurs in different ways albeit with a similar result. Alice, just as she did as a small child, chases a white rabbit and falls down a rabbit hole. As she plummets down, the objects around her seem to float in a way that commands her to look at and affix meaning to them. Alice herself is also defying gravity and as such has already begun, although not in an active way, to defy the clearcut rules which defined her previous existence. Elizabeth is about to receive her proposal from Commodore Norrington when the constricting corset she is wearing causes her to faint and plummet over the cliff's edge, miraculously missing the rocks on the way down. It is noteworthy that the corset, symbol of white aristocratic femininity, has the capacity to cause death. This marks Elizabeth's first encounter with Captain Jack Sparrow, who has to dive into the ocean to save her and who automatically knows the corset caused the problem. Elizabeth returns to Port Royal, but later she is kidnapped by Captain Barbossa (Geoffrey Rush) and his crew who need her pirate medallion, which is really a piece of Aztec gold, in order to lift a curse on them.

Titanic's Rose is coded as racially liminal at the level of the body, her (deathly) white skin offset here by vibrant red hair and green jewellery signifying her future liberation via an encounter with the 'Emerald Isle.'

... and flirts with the prospect of an alternate identity that could result in a more empowered self

Alice suffers a fall from the old world and subsequently a fall from aristocratic white femininity.

Elizabeth's corset robs her of breath resulting in her fall to the ocean below and first encounter with the pirate Jack Sparrow.

The representation of the pirate as ethnicized other in *Pirates of the Caribbean* is not simple, with a clearly delineated boundary dividing them from the British Navy. In fact the meanings and stakes attached to these representations shift from film to film within the franchise. Because of their lives in the sun and poor hygiene habits that leave their skin covered in grime, the pirates are visually much darker than the Port Royal residents despite being predominantly "white." Also, the pirates live a nomadic, rootless lifestyle that alludes to that of the Romani gypsies. Although the pirates do not have a fixed ethnicity, they are nevertheless grouped together and coded by the British in the film as Other via the mobilization of a number of familiar stereotypes. The British consider the pirates to pose both a sexual and economic threat to white civilization, a fact which Jack Sparrow displays awareness of when he informs Navy representatives of his plans to "rape, pillage and pilfer my weasly black guts out." Although Jack knowingly reflects back at its creators their characterization of his kind, from what we see of the pirates in the first film these stereotypes hold a high degree of accuracy. They are individualistic, greedy squabblers who for the most part are unable to unite to achieve a sense of purpose. That fact along with their circulatory confusing banter works to render them harmless and ineffectual, hardly the threat the British Navy fears.

This characterization as squabbling, having a me-first mentality, and being unable to share also works to render the pirates as child-like, a way of representing the "savage" commonly employed to justify a people's subjection to colonization. The pirate crews seem to operate at the intersection of two stereotypes that Donald Bogle found available for black males in Hollywood cinema – the coon, or buffoon, and the buck. Bogle points out that the harmless and ineffectual (simple and child-like) buffoon quelled the white fear of black males, while the brutal buck heightened and played on this fear through his representation as

> "oversexed and savage, violent and frenzied (in his) lust for white flesh" (Bogle, 1973, p. 13).

In the film, the English fear of miscegenation is clearly seen when Elizabeth's lifeless body is pulled ashore by Jack after he has saved her from drowning. Jack leans over Elizabeth to rid her of her corset, an act misread by the Royal Navy who immediately draw their swords. In fact, this scene echoes one in *Titanic*. Rose, attempting to commit suicide, is pulled from over the ship's railing by Jack and as a result collapses beneath him on the deck. Rose's scream alerts her first class companions who come running to her rescue. They misread the scene before them as a sexual attack by Jack, who according to the "old money" whites is suspect both in terms of class and implicitly in terms of ethnicity as he predominantly associates with Irish and Italian migrants (Redmond, 2004).

In *Pirates of the Caribbean*, much is made in the films of the pirates' lust for the travelling white woman Elizabeth. When Captain Barbossa kidnaps her, the most buffoonish of the pirates, Pintel (Lee Arenberg) and Ragetti (Mackenzie Crook), tell her that if she does not dine with the captain then she will have to dine with the crew naked. In another scene she stands over a grate while the pirates queue beneath attempting to see up her dress. These scenes are knowing ones, played for laughs with the pirates usually portrayed as comedic rather than menacing. Additionally, Pintel and Rigetti have an equally ridiculous mirror image pair in the Royal Navy, Murtogg (Giles New) and Mullroy (Angus Barnett). Although that pair are not lustful, they are inept and ineffectual, so that their characterization functions to question the validity of the divisions between self and Other

The elusive Jack Sparrow and his fellow pirates pose a sexual and economic threat to the inhabitants of Port Royal.

The Navy fears for Elizabeth's virtue after Sparrow rescues and rids her of the confining corset.

Lustful pirates gather beneath the floorboards in a bid to see up Elizabeth's dress.

Buffoonish pirates Pintel and Rigetti are mirrored by the Navy's Murtogg and Mullroy, destabilising the binary construction of Self and Other.

that the Navy has worked so hard to construct.

Additionally, in the pirate world Elizabeth is revealed to be a clever strategist, brave and able to take care of herself. She becomes aware of how her society requires damsel-in-distress white femininity as a performance and thus how it has no basis in reality. Knowing that, she attempts to faint on a couple of occasions in order to attract attention away from other happenings. This distancing from the old kind of performance, now allowed by the magical world, serves to destabilize the social constructions of whiteness so adhered to in Port Royal and works to prove unfounded white male fears for her safety and preservation of virtue. It is worth noting a contrast in characterization here, for while Elizabeth can utilize her previously imposed identity in games of strategy, this is not so easy for the majority of pirates who are never allowed this gap between self and mask.

Audience sympathy, however, is always right behind the pirates. They live far more interesting, adventurous lives than the residents of Port Royal. With the exception of Lord Beckett (Tom Hollander), every developed character is either a pirate or a pirate sympathizer and they have star power, given that Johnny Depp plays the most notorious of the lot who has the best lines and the best escapes. The contained, civilized and mannered Port Royal world is boring in comparison to the action-packed spectacle of the pirate world. But the appeal of the Captain Jack character needs to be read through an additional cultural lens. He is not just *any* pirate, but a rock star pirate. Publicity material for the film has highlighted the fact that Johnny Depp based the look and character of Jack Sparrow on Rolling Stones guitarist Keith Richards, who makes a cameo in the third film as his father. Jack's love of adventure, sex and alcohol allude to rock'n'roll promises of excess and freedom. The ultimate rock'n'roll icon is a hedonistic narcissist, which Jack certainly is, and adopts performance styles that challenge societal ideas as to what is morally acceptable.

Rock'n'roll itself is highly reliant on its rhythm and blues influence and star bands like the Stones continually appropriated music from different ethnic groups in order to keep their music fresh. It was also the era of the Stones, the 60s and 70s, that saw performers begin to play with gender roles and bisexual performance. Mick Jagger, with his pouting and flamboyant stage moves, incorporated feminine bodily signifiers into his act while those involved in the glam rock movement played with androgyny through make-up, glittering costumes and lyrics that often suggested an ambiguous sexuality. Jack Sparrow, with his eyeliner, mincing walk and pouty demeanor is thoroughly queered even though the films take every opportunity to portray him as a womanizer. Sparrow then, while an ethnic threat is also of ambiguous sexuality, and all of this is mediated through the lens of rock'n'roll performance.

This rock'n'roll element is a device that elevates Jack as a "star" of the seas while perhaps operating as a distancing device in that we never know when Jack is performing and when he is not, or whose side he is on. Will and Elizabeth are intermediary characters, able to go between the English and the pirates because they hold currency in both worlds. Jack is less able to do so but differs from most of the other pirates in his self-awareness. He needs piracy in order to fuel his own image and continue his star story. As such he *over performs* piracy, evidenced in his telling of outlandish stories

Elizabeth learns that aristocratic white femininity is a performance and attempts to strategically utilize it in the pirate world in order to achieve her goals.

Johnny Depp's rock star pirate provides the 'colour' of the Pirates of the Caribbean franchise

The rock'n'roll element of the films alludes to how ethnic Otherness can be performed in order to create an air of transgressive mystique. Here Keith Richards of the Rolling Stones appears as Jack's father.

The urgency of the cause for pirate liberation is shown through the opening scene of a pirate hanging in *At World's End*.

involving escape from an abandoned island on roped together sea turtles. Jack can use the negative stereotypes circulating about his kind as a source of empowerment. But he also alludes to how Otherness can be appropriated in order to create an intriguing air of transgressive mystique so integral to successful rock'n'roll celebrity.

Jack Sparrow then functions as a liminal figure in many ways. The character lends a campy, ironic and playful tone to *The Curse of the Black Pearl,* a movie that certainly does not take itself too seriously. In contrast, the third film *At World's End* opens with the mass hanging of a group of pirates, including children, an indication that the stakes have been raised considerably.

The representation of the otherworldly characters in *Alice in Wonderland* is markedly different. The inhabitants of the fantastical space do not represent even a remote threat through their ethnicity or way of life. The realm exists as completely distinct from Alice's world rather than intermingling with it as is the case in *Pirates,* but also the characters in their dependence and desperation are remarkably passive. When Alice first wanders into Wonderland she has shrunk to a fraction of her normal size and gazes at her new surroundings with "wonder." Yet as the wise caterpillar informs her, the nation is not actually called Wonderland but rather Underland. The former term was just a word the young Alice chose to represent her feeling for the place. When Alice enters Underland, it is clear the characters have been awaiting her arrival for some time. They rush up to her excitedly and reverently, enquiring if she is in fact the real Alice. She is not a little girl who has to navigate her way through a nonsensical world but rather someone who in her absence has gained fame as a person of future great importance to the nation.

Although Wonderland is a dreamscape with some of its characters acting as doubles for people whom Alice knows in real life, it is also a country and a crumbling one at that. Burton's Underland is a barren and unproductive third world nation whose inhabitants suffer a poor quality of life at the hands of a tyrannical dictatorial regime. It is a country where danger lurks at every turn, where inhabitants could be eaten by ferocious creatures such as the bandersnatch one day or hauled before the Red Queen's court on trumped up charges the next. The Red Queen is much like a spoiled child, which works to constitute Underland itself as immature and in need of growth, a problem that Alice must rectify as she experiences her own personal development. Small in stature and speaking with an occasional lisp, the Red Queen spends her days playing backyard games, eating tarts and ordering things to keep her amused. "Dwink!" she calls as she leaps on to her throne. She, it is revealed, is effectively re-living out her childhood since the first time around she was neglected by her parents in favor of her more ideally beautiful sister. Her inability to free herself from the tyranny of gender norms now manifests itself in the poor social control of others.

Underland is a place without a recognizable regime of law and order, and as such it makes no sense to Alice and in turn fails its subjects. The madness of the Hatter (Johnny Depp) in this film can be directly attributed to anger and dismay at his social situation and the bloody tactics of the Red Queen. Once a happy servant of the White Queen, Hatter was forced to witness a murderous coup where the jabberwocky was employed to rid his mistress of her court and send her into hiding. As a result, Hatter spends his days holding pseudo tea parties in the woods. When Alice returns and travels on the brim of his hat, the Hatter descends into an intense monologue delivered in a Scottish accent, growling phrases like "down with

Alice gazes at Underland with wonder upon her return to the fantastical space ...

...where it is revealed through the Oraculum that it is her destiny to slay the jabberwocky and return the rightful ruler to the throne.

the bloody big head" and "the entire world is falling to ruin." As it transpires, Alice has arrived to slay the jabberwocky and thus return the White Queen to power, restoring law and order and a habitable environment for the creatures. This is something that the residents of Underland cannot achieve themselves and so Alice becomes the embodiment of a global super power whose knowledge of the correct ways of doing things is indispensable to an ailing nation like Underland. This story is one of feminist liberation, but Alice is only able to achieve these ends through invading and conquering Underland, a plotline strongly dependent on an invocation of colonial discourse.

Furthermore the nation's inhabitants completely welcome this act, as it will bring only benefit to them as well as to Alice, who has no unsavory motives and only gains in terms of personal growth. Colonialism, the white promise of a civilizing and stabilizing force to the unruly untamed world, brings no pain to the fantastical space. The characters there approve of it wholeheartedly as necessary and in fact as destiny. When Alice achieves her goal, it is implied, the country could be known as Wonderland again rather than Underland, a dark, dreary and dangerous underbelly. Problematically, Alice can exercise power and might upon a smaller nation because it is her destiny, her God-given right to do so, a mythic rationale commonly given for war by larger nations intent on expanding their land and resources.

Go to page 3

To top   Print version   JC 54   *Jump Cut* home

The characterization of the Red Queen as infantile works to construct Underland as in need of guidance and growth.

The Red Queen's insecurities about her failure to live up to idealized gender norms results in her followers adopting a performative deformity.

Hatter's madness in the film results from the trauma he suffered when the Red Queen attacked the White Queen and her followers.

From passive spectacles to active charismatic authorities

While both Elizabeth and Alice are not accepted by their new worlds right away, each script posits a turning point where they transition from passive spectacles to active authorities. In this representation of an *authoritative* white femininity, the films under discussion here differ from a film like *Titanic.* For although Rose needs to first perform Irishness in order to liberate herself and eventually partake in activities normally reserved for men, she is never really elevated above this group in a way which requires them to defer to her power.

In *Curse of the Black Pearl,* the narrative depicts Elizabeth largely as a figure at the mercy of the male characters. She is kidnapped, locked away, rescued and at times denied access to the action. Although at the end she fights against Barbossa's cursed crew, she is unable to convince the other pirates to help her. Once kidnapped by Barbossa, however, she discovers a certain similarity in their predicaments. Gazing hungrily at the feast set before her in the Captain's cabin, Elizabeth refrains from eating as she is still adhering to the rules required of aristocratic white femininity. It is Barbossa who informs her that these rules have no currency in the pirate world. "There is no need to stand on call to impress anyone, you must be hungry," he states, causing Elizabeth to tear into a piece of chicken and as such begin to shed her prior identity. Barbossa then informs Elizabeth of his crew's curse, which means they can no longer gain any pleasure through satisfying desire and as such cannot eat or love. Elizabeth at Port Royal could not eat or love if she chose either, and so a form of empathy passes between the two. Since unlike Barbossa and his crew, Elizabeth's barriers were only of the social kind, this dinner marks the point where she begins to realize that social barriers can be permeated and even exploited.

It is not until the second film however that this character really begins to take charge. Elizabeth, wanting to save Will from a charge of piracy, sets out to find Captain Jack by stowing away on board a pirate ship. Because the pirates have superstitions against women on board, Elizabeth has to dress up as a boy. This marks a complete rejection of her initial status as "English lady" and is also a performance that allows her to begin to take control of the seas. Through exploiting the pirates' fear of women by setting up a message from a ghostly widowed maiden, Elizabeth ensures that the ship head for Tortuga. The fact that Elizabeth goes to rescue Will marks a reversal in traditional gender roles as does the fact that she is now able to chart her own travel over the seas.

Elizabeth in taking charge of the ship and by extension taking charge of

Elizabeth's bad table manners mark an early moment where she breaks the rules of aristocratic white femininity.

In *Dead Man's Chest* Elizabeth is able to command the direction of a pirate ship by dressing as a boy and playing on the pirates' superstitions about women.

Elizabeth in one of her many disguises
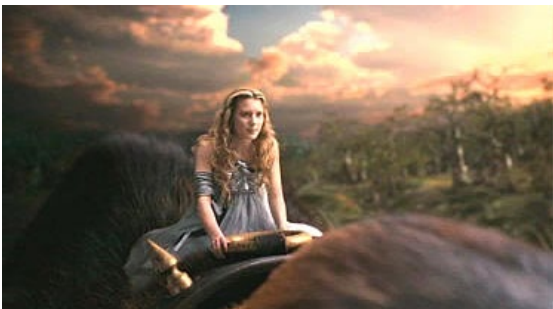
her entire journey is transgressing the feminine position in favor of a masculine relationship to space. Offering an observation that helps explain the significance of this moment in the film, phenomenologist Vivian Sobchack, in an attempt to account for why men are reluctant to ask for directions, explains that male identity presumes a relationship to space that is organized around

> "one's embodied intentionality and its perceived possibility of realising projects in the world...informed by the confidence that one is...the constitutive source of meaningful space" (Sobchack, 2004, p. 32).

In contrast, women in their status as objects as well as subjects tend to inhabit space more tentatively, which

> "makes their bodies less a transparent capacity for action and movement than a hermeneutic problem" (2004, p. 33).

Elizabeth is still a white traveller, and as such her new position is entirely in accordance with a model of white male power that exploits the Other for its own ends, in this instance controlling the pirates so she can be reunited with Will. Her act of gender passing highlights one of Elizabeth's key functions in the next two films, which is to act as a master/mistress of disguise. Elizabeth is the character most easily able to pass in the *Pirates* franchise, whether as a member of the opposite sex, a pirate crew member, a villager in the "Orient," or even a trapped goddess. Elizabeth's entry into the pirate world provides her with a liberating performative power that is granted to her both because of her gender and because of her race.

In *Alice in Wonderland* the creatures don't believe they have the right girl because Alice seems subdued in character, passified. The Hatter informs her that she has lost her "muchness," is "hardly Alice" and is always "too small or too tall." Alice's mission therefore is to reclaim a sense of self that she lost in England due to the requirements and constraints placed upon her gender, to find the right balance. Significantly when Hatter recognizes Alice as the correct person, he gender confuses her, stating jubilantly,

> "I'd know him anywhere!"

Like Elizabeth, Alice's transition from passive spectacle to active agent has to come with a shedding of femininity and an immediate agreement to don the traditional accoutrements of masculinity. Here her personal growth is considered complete when she agrees to wear armor and carry a sword. Her transition also comes with a renewed command of the foreign space and place. This comes with Alice's realization that she can create her own journey:

> "This is my dream. I choose where to go from here. I make the path."

Although this statement marks Alice's coming of age, her transition from childhood to adulthood, it also marks her rejection of passive Victorian femininity in favor of a more active role in life, a rejection only made possible through the reverence shown to her by Underland's inhabitants. Alice agrees to undertake a physical journey that

culminates in layers of metaphorical significance.

With the help of Bayard the Bloodhound Alice can cover vast expanses of Underland in order to reach the Red Queen's castle, thus overcoming any previous uncertainty regarding her place in the country. When she arrives at the castle, Alice must construct a fake history in order to explain her presence and so claims she comes from the mythical town of Umbridge. Her performance is designed to obscure the real power Alice holds from the Red Queen. Like Elizabeth Swann then, Alice achieves liberation from gender oppression through shedding her prior identity and embracing traditional forms of active male authority. Despite the acceptance of these women by those in the fantastical space, their authority explicitly privileges whiteness in that it requires the activation of a global vision that seeks to travel, to know, to trick, and to conquer.

Elizabeth and Alice do not merely transition from passive spectacles to active authorities, for there is something *special* about the authority that they eventually proceed to hold that marks it as different from typical white colonial control. This special authority is alluded to at the films' beginnings which indicate a connection the aristocratic white woman has with the magical space. It is her lost object and the potential source of her liberation; in turn she is the source of liberation for the oppressed inhabitants of the magical world. Therefore the relationship is symbiotic. This relationship, however, also depends upon female protagonist's elevation above the pirates/residents of Underland. As such, the narratives suggest, the inhabitants of the fantastical space have to agree to defer power to her. For that to happen, something must differentiate the female character from those in the magical world even though her journey requires the rejection of her prior identity.

In *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest,* the audience comes to realize this difference following an exchange between Elizabeth and Jack. A source of comedy in the franchise is the idea that Elizabeth may desire Jack despite finding him repulsive. An example of such a moment comes when she displays a bad temper after she uses a compass to discover what she wants most and it points to him. In another scene, which more tellingly points out the difference between the two, Jack one day declares to Elizabeth that they should get married because they really are very similar. He theorizes that soon she won't be able to resist on account of her curiosity and her longing for freedom to act on selfish impulse. Elizabeth denies they are similar, pointing to Jack's lack of honor, decency and moral center. Although Jack is quite correct in imagining that Elizabeth covets the liberty his lifestyle offers, her reply indicates what she perceives to be the difference between the pirates and people like her and Will, who engage in acts of piracy for the benefit of others. Elizabeth's moral center, her belief in and willing to fight for a cause, is what elevates her above the pirates who are all out for themselves. It is Elizabeth's upbringing in a "civilized" white culture that problematically marks out her moral superiority and it is she who has to instil this sense of honor in the pirates in order to unite them.

When we are first introduced to the Brethren Court, the government made up of pirate lords, it is clear the organization is a farce. No

Alice commands the foreign fantastical space by taking control of the bloodhound and racing across country to the Red Queen's castle.

Alice upon entering the castle must hide her 'liberator' identity from the Red Queen.

Elizabeth is disgusted by Jack's advances, pointing to his poor hygiene and lack of honor, decency and moral center.

The farcical Brethren Court that Elizabeth must unite.

Elizabeth fights against Lord Beckett's plan to take control of pirate territory.

Alice is bathed in light as she celebrates her triumph over both the Red Queen's reign and the patriarchal reign that kept her captive in England.

Alice's newfound empowerment is manifested through her decision to expand trade routes into China.

decisions are ever made because each lord always pushes his or her own agenda, and no King can ever be elected because each lord will always vote for himself. Jack's decision to vote for Elizabeth instead of himself results in her being crowned leader. It is through this role, another performance of gender transgression, that Elizabeth is able to gain the respect of the pirates. Defining charismatic authority, Max Weber (1946) states that this type of power rules by virtue of a gift not accessible to everybody and also by virtue of a mission that must be obeyed and followed. This mission is one of anti-colonialism as Elizabeth is fighting for the pirate way of life in the face of the evil Lord Beckett, who has declared that the blank edges of the map are being filled in and the pirates must find a place in the new world or perish. Yet her mission also requires that the previously anarchic pirates learn to follow a leader and so Elizabeth becomes a symbol of order and unification in a time of social upheaval.[5] [open endnotes in new window]Later Elizabeth's success in the war mission following a speech in which she instructs the pirates to "hoist the colors" earns her respect and admiration. At the end of the franchise it is implied that she controls the seas as this is the promise for one who controls the Flying Dutchman.

Alice's charismatic authority is recognized much earlier than Elizabeth's as her very arrival in Underland is marked as a fulfilled prophecy and as such has deeply religious undertones. Alice is the embodiment of a global power player on the one hand, but she is also crucially a messiah. Underland waits for her as though it is waiting for the return of a Christ-like figure who can re-introduce the possibility of Eden, who can bring light to dark, and who can enlighten those who have lost hope. In fact, Alice does not have much of a choice in the matter. Like Joan of Arc, it has been prophesized that she will carry out this task for a higher purpose, and so her charismatic authority is bound up with her task to carry out a divine mission. Just as Richard Dyer's study of whiteness explored how Christian ideology was and is utilized to inform and maintain the hegemony of whiteness, in invoking the concept of the saint with the divine mission *Alice in Wonderland* naturalizes the colonial authority that Alice exercises through a religious discourse that marks her out as Chosen. In fact, it is Alice's refusal to comply with gender norms at the beginning of the film that marks her out as special and so her feminism becomes a crucial aspect of her "charisma" – the indefinable special quality that empowers Alice and endows her with the right to act upon Underland as she does. Furthermore, if charismatic authority must reside outside the patriarchal bureaucratic system as Weber hypothesizes, then it makes sense that those endowed with it in these Hollywood blockbusters are women.

Conclusion

In analyzing these female protagonists of the recent Hollywood fantasy, I am writing as someone who responds to the strength of

Alice stands at the bow of the ship named 'Wonder,' now able to simultaneously chart her personal growth and global travel.

Elizabeth Swann gazes over the seas that Will must travel, safe in the knowledge that she can control these seas through the heart of Davy Jones.

character these young women exhibit and their willingness to completely disregard societal law, venture into the unknown and carve out new paths for themselves in order to achieve their dreams. I find these characters refreshing amidst the sea of chick flick heroines who are either sad, lonely and unlucky in love or rely on their credit cards in order to empower themselves through shopping, trumpeting the decoration of the body as a primary means of capital in order to acquire fame and success. In fact if I were to look at *Pirates of the Caribbean* or *Alice in Wonderland* solely on the basis of gender, then I would not have much negative to say about either.

However, Elizabeth Swann and Alice Kingsleigh cannot be analysed solely on the basis of gender for it is their rejection of *white* femininity and subsequent embrace of an exoticized and "ethnicized" Otherness that allows them their feminist liberation. The story of gender, I have argued, can be utilized in order to mask a story that privileges white colonial power as is the case in *Alice in Wonderland* or mobilized as a type of compromise in a film which at times critiques the hegemony of whiteness, as is observed in *Pirates*. White feminine performance then is a powerful site through which contemporary questions regarding the meaning of empowerment for women are posited. However, the importance of analyzing the ideological specificities of various texts cannot be underestimated. It too often the case that this type of feminist empowerment is reliant on the singling out and elevation of white womanhood which is in turn dependent on a blurring of boundaries between personal empowerment and social control.

Go to Notes page

Notes

1. Although my analysis in this essay will focus on contemporary film, it is important to acknowledge that there are both cinematic and literary historical precedents to the characters of Elizabeth and Alice, with the character of Manuela (Judy Garland) in Vincente Minnelli's *The Pirate* (1948) for instance strongly prefiguring Elizabeth Swann. The woman who breaks free from societal gender restrictions through an engagement with the exoticized Other is not just to be found in the heritage narrative but also the Western and in colonial literature. [return to page 1 of essay]

2. There is in fact a fourth *Pirates* film entitled *On Stranger Tides* but for the purposes of this article I will concentrate only on the first three films in the franchise as these are the only ones in which the character of Elizabeth Swann appears.

3. KJ Donnelly discusses the commodification of Irish culture in the film in his essay "Riverdancing as the Ship Goes Down" included in the edited collection *Titanic in Myth and Memory: Representations in Visual and Literary Culture.* Sean Redmond argues that Jack is associated with Otherness as opposed to the hyper whiteness of the upper classes through his friendship with Italian and Irish passengers in steerage, his characterization as a bohemian artist and his mimicry of the white gentleman in "*Titanic:* Whiteness on the High Seas of Meaning" to be found in the same edited collection.

4. Daniel Bernardi's edited collections *Classic Hollywood Classic Whiteness* and *The Persistence of Whiteness* contain numerous thought-provoking essays on the representational significance of whiteness to Hollywood cinema and its stars. Films discussed include classics like *King Kong* to the science fiction fare of the fifties and contemporary blockbusters like *Lord of the Rings,* while other authors consider the importance of race to stars like Jennifer Lopez and Dorothy Dandridge.

5. Richard Dyer explains in *Stars* (1998) that charismatic appeal is at its most effective when it offers a sense of order and stability in times of social upheaval (p. 31). [return to page 3]

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The "illegal trailer" for the film May 5, 2010. Before the trailer shows violent gore , Machete says "This is Machete with a special Cinco message...to Arizona!"

The internet trailer released on Cinco de Mayo 2010 by website Ain't it Cool News was later said to be a joke by Director Robert Rodriguez.

Relying on racialized stereotypes of Latino men as violent, Senator McLaughlin's right-hand man, Michael Booth, sets Machete up as he frames Machete for shooting the Senator.

"Machete improvises": racial rhetoric in digital reception of Robert Rodriguez's *Machete*

by Marina Wood

Not many people made it out to the theaters to see *Machete* (Rodriguez, 2010),[1] a border film[2] with a "race" war thrown in. In fact, the only reason I did was because I heard that the main character was a *jornalero* (day laborer)[3] and as an activist and an educator in my local jornalero and migrant community, I was intrigued. I was surprised that I enjoyed the so-called "gore-fest"[4] so much. I found that its smart humor about immigration, its border-centric inside jokes, and its portrayal of women as strong characters managed to temporarily overshadow the film's over-the top violence and overly sexualized portrayal of its female characters. My mixed yet overall positive reaction spurred me to turn to the Internet to gauge the film's reception. What I found was that the film was seen alternatively as mindless entertainment, a racially charged political film with some problems, another blood-soaked Rodriguez movie with needless politics, and a ticking time bomb that would cause an all-out race-war.

The film's trailer[5] emerged online on May 5, 2010, just weeks after the signing of the controversial Arizona law SB1070, a law which would provide Arizona police with the power to detain anyone they suspect of being "illegal."[6] This law was criticized widely by human rights and migrant rights organizations and activists for being an overt legalization of racial profiling and was responded to with massive boycotts and protests.[7] Reacting to the law, the film's blood-soaked trailer opens with an angry Machete (Danny Trejo) dedicating a "special Cinco de Mayo message to Arizona," and ends with the narrator saying the catchphrase "they just fucked with the wrong Mexican," over a montage of explosions and throat slitting. Internet audiences alternatively have found this "message" hilarious and a not-so thinly veiled threat. Due to this trailer, regardless of if people viewed the film *Machete* or not, it managed to spark controversy on the blogosphere.

Machete has become a catalyst for a conversation about race, nation, borders, and migration in a space outside of the news media and among demographics that don't typically engage in these discussions. I am approaching *Machete* by first discussing and defining race, racial formation, and what the racial context at the time of the film was and then analyzing websites and blogs and comments that discuss *Machete*.

Though *Machete* is not the perfect vehicle to raise sociopolitical consciousness in the masses, I argue it does succeed in accomplishing the "re-racing" of the immigration issue. So often immigration debates claim not to be about race, but this time people had to talk about skin color, language, and culture as factors in anti-immigrant sentiment because *Machete* uses exaggeration and overtness to make very clear that race and migration are inexplicably connected. A factor inherent to this discussion is how Chican@/Latin@ people fit into racial categories, which is an important part of identification, community, solidarity, and coalition-building.

About the film

The film *Machete* is the product of an idea for a character that director Robert Rodriguez had for Danny Trejo over ten years ago when doing the Mexico trilogy. [8] After Quentin Tarantino and Robert Rodriguez collaborated on a number of film projects together, they created a double feature, *Grindhouse*, named in homage of Grindhouse theaters from the 70's which showed cult, horror, low budget, and exploitation films.[9] *Grindhouse* included two neo-exploitation films, *Planet Terror* (Rodriguez, 2007), a horror/zombie movie, and *Death Proof* (Tarantino, 2007), a horror/revenge movie. Rodriguez decided to use the character of "Machete" in a fake trailer for *Grindhouse* without the original intention of creating a feature length film.[10]

Following on the heels of *Grindhouse*, *Machete* is a mixture of the 70's grindhouse, low-budget aesthetic that Rodriguez used in *Planet Terror* and the genres of exploitation, *cine fronterizo* (border film), and *narcotraficante* (a Mexican police subgenre). Exploitation films generally were seen in the United States in the 60's and 70's and brought issues such as crime, racism, poverty and other content not sanctioned in Hollywood to the big screen, even if that screen was only at a grindhouse theatre.

The film begins in Mexico, though it does not specify where. Danny Trejo is Machete, a tough-as-nails Federale who ends up relying on a vigilante form of justice when his corrupt boss instructs him not to seek out a missing girl. While Machete and his partner are driving to retrieve the girl, the partner says, "We don't have to do this," to which Machete replies, "If not us, then who?"

The partner is shot as they enter the building (by driving into it) and Machete is stabbed by the kidnap victim who turned out to be working for Torrez, the drug boss. After Machete is stabbed by the formerly kidnapped woman, she is killed along with Machete's wife and child, and Machete is left to die in a fire.

Machete is shot by the real shooter. He was blackmailed by Booth after being picked up from a day labor corner and that vulnerability led to him being both shot and framed for shooting the Senator.

Machete's partner pledges his loyalty to Machete right before he is shot, calling him 'jefe.' To this Machete responds in reference to his weapon, 'this is the boss.'

The film's beginning takes place in an unspecific location simply described as "Mexico."

Machete at the *cachadero* awaiting work.

Torrez, played by Steven Seagal, decapitates Machete's wife with a Samurai sword. Seagal is not only not Latino, but he is actually a supporter of Joe Arpaio, the

La Revolución at the end of the film is basically a civil war between migrants, workers, members of "the network," and border vigilantes. The Network members use

"Hey, baby, que paso?" plays the music in the background as the film takes us to the other side of the border, a *cachadero,*[11] or day labor zone, in Texas. Here Machete is working as a jornalero. After he beats a man one-handed in a street boxing match, he is solicited by Michael Booth (Jeff Fahey) to kill Senator McLaughlin (Robert DeNiro). Meanwhile, the Senator, along with a vigilante group clearly modeled after the Minute Men[12] and run by Von (Don Johnson), roam the border and film themselves murdering migrants.

During a campaign speech, Machete is atop a building preparing to shoot the Senator, but Booth's crony, a hidden sniper, shoots both the Senator in the leg and Machete in the head instead. Booth then points up at Machete and publicly scapegoats him. Machete violently escapes police and the Senator's henchmen and is saved twice over by the two female protagonists, Luz (Michelle Rodriguez), the good-hearted and badass immigrant's rights revolutionary/taco truck vendedora, and Sartana (Jessica Alba), the plays-by-the rules ICE agent who supports Machete because he was a cop. At one point Machete leaves Sartana to take care of some business and she gets mad at him for not texting her. He replies "Machete don't text."

Though much more happens in the film, the basic storyline follows Machete seeking revenge on Booth at the same time that Booth is trying to have him killed. The story unfolds, indicating that the Senator's campaign contributor is the Mexican drug boss, Torrez (Steven Seagal). Throughout the film, Sartana (Jessica Alba) begins to understand that laws can be unjust and she exposes Torrez, Michael Booth (Jeff Fahey), Von (Don Johnson) and McLaughlin (Robert DeNiro), while Luz (Michelle Rodriguez) is shot by Von but survives and returns in the final scenes for the revolution.

The film ends with Machete and ICE agent Sartana riding off into the night on his motorcycle. Though Machete accepted her company, he did not accept her offer for "papers."

Also, Machete ends up having a brother, a priest (Cheech Marin) who is later killed by Booth and a hitman. After this goes down, he texts Booth, "You just fucked with the wrong Mexican." Sartana says, "I thought Machete don't text." To which he reples, "Machete improvises." In the end, "the network" (migrants, jornaleros, workers, homies, pachucas, palateros, and more) which is loosely led by Luz or more appropriately, the mythical counterpart she invented to give migrant crossers hope, Shé (an iconic feminine version of the Ché image), come violently head to head with the border vigilantes in an all out civil war/revolution. The war

culminates in a Machete/Torrez battle which Machete wins, and the revolution sort of fizzles out. The film ends with Machete riding off into the distance with Sartana straddling him on his motorcycle.

Seeing race

General consensus among racial theorists is that race is not biologically meaningful as a category though they have determined that social meanings are projected on race that are undeniably fraught with real-life consequences. For what Kwame Anthony Appiah calls racialists,[13] "races" are small groups of people divided based on their supposed "essential" commonalities of heredity, biology, intellect and morality.[14] Karim Murji says that the term "race" does not have a precise definition, but that it historically has included both visible markers such as skin color, hair texture, facial features, and skull shape and invisible markers such as blood, bones, and brain size.[15] According to Appiah and Murji, ideas about race and racism today have changed since scientific racism's heyday, but that regardless, the category is based on and shaped by its original definitions.

Today, the term race refers to racial groups formed through practices of racism, racialization and racial essentialism, which treats groups of people "as if they share some common essence."[16] Murji adds that more recent terms such as "people of color" and "color-blind" reduce race to color, adding that in Latin America in particular color is a specific marker as there are several terms for varying skin colors, from "lechoso" to "morado."[17]

Though the term "raza," which literally translates to "race," is used by the Chican@[18] movement and its contemporary institutionalized forms, it is generally used to mean "the people" such as in the cases of the Raza Unida party and the National Council of La Raza. However, the term originated in José Vasconcelos's 1925 essay, "La Raza Cósmica" (The Cosmic Race), which presented a utopian future that posited the opposite of racial purity, a future race comprised of all races.

Nurse Fine, a member of The Network and one of the many racially ambiguous/mixed culture characters, lies to Booth's henchmen about where Machete is being treated and then warns the doctor that they are coming.

Just as in daily life, in *Machete* blurry and contradictory lines are drawn between identity-based social groups. For example, "the Network" as described by Luz (Michelle Rodriguez) is made up of "all types, all races: lawyers, priests, doctors, homeboys…" Two characters who are shown to be part of the Network are a readably white man and a Mexican man (they mention this in a scene) who work together as dishwashers. Another group of characters in the Network are the doctors, nurses, and administrative staff at the hospital where Machete is taken after he is injured. Some of the staff are light skinned but appear to be of Latino descent, some appear white, and some are brown. Another set of members of the Network are two homeboys, one of which is clearly Latino, Jorge, and one of which is white with red hair, Julio. Though I assumed he was of Latino descent, there is a line in which he comes out as "adopted." The following exchange between Machete and Julio was in relation to a possible war between border vigilantes and the Network.

Two dishwashers, both part of The Network, watch each other's backs during *la Revolución*.

> Machete: It's not your war.
> Julio: I may be adopted, ese…
> Machete: No shit.

Julio tells Machete that now that Luz is dead, he needs to lead them to fight.

At first Machete rejects Julio's proposition based on it not being "his war," but then he decides to help once Julio asks him, "If not us, then who?"

Torrez is constantly being kept company by this woman in Mexico. Since her character is solely ornamental as she has no name or lines, there is no way for the audience to know her race or ethnicity.

Sartana looks up Machete and finds that he is an ex-Federale. His record says his code name

The above exchange exemplifies the unwelcoming sentiment that many activists have towards those who are not Mexican. But in the film, the Network, which does end up fighting, is made up of people who connect less by race or nationality than by class, solidarity, and politics. The two dishwashers, the two homeboys, and the group of hospital staff are connected more by social class, friendship, work and upbringing than by any other factors. However, though white people and mixed race/culture people are part of the Network, this does not mean that their whiteness goes unnoticed. As demonstrated by the conversation above, Machete tells Julio it is obvious that he is not Mexican and Julio himself also acknowledges it. What this shows is that in *Machete*, the Network functions as a utopian solidarity group that is neither nationalist and separatist nor color blind and unaware of the consequences of perceived racial difference.

Race as we know it today can be easily conflated with terms such as nationality and ethnicity, especially when talking about *Mexicanidad* and *Chicanismo*. As a term, "race" is most often affiliated with Blackness, and secondarily with anyone not-white. Racial rhetoric when applied to Latin@ people is either reduced to color, for example the phrase "brown pride," or nation, such as a specific country of origin. One's nationality is a person's membership in a nation, usually meaning they are a citizen of a particular country, but it could also point to groups within geopolitical nations such as indigenous groups and Chican@ nationalists. Mexican Americans and Chican@s do not fit easily into racial categorizations. The U.S .Census has historically only had the choices "white" or "Black." Even when "Mexican or Mexican American" was finally put as an option, these numbers were counted as white.[19]

The 2010 U.S. Census has decided that "Hispanic origin" is an ethnicity rather than a race. This origin, they say,

> "can be viewed as the heritage, nationality group, lineage, or country of birth of the person or the person's parents or ancestors before their arrival in the United States."[20]

Ethnicity then, though often used synonymously with race, is a whole other thing. Karim Murji defines ethnicity as "quasi-primordial collective sense of shared descent and distinct cultural traditions," which is a break from the biological and physical markers of race.[21] However, as we can see in the case of the U.S. Census, though one can be an ethnicity, a race, and a nationality, Mexicans, Mexican Americans, Chican@s, and Latin@s are raceless. In the case of the film *Machete*, the characters all live in Texas, one of the seven states which once belonged to Mexico and are collectively referred to as "Aztlan" or the home of the Aztec people within Chican@ folklore.[22]

The moving of borders, the nonexistence of Latin@ races, and the definition of ethnicity including cultures just as much as descent, all point to the precariousness of race, nation and ethnicity. Though there may be legal implications to a person born on one side of the border rather than the other, their race does not change as they cross, their culture is not washed away, and their skin does not change colors.

In the film *Machete*, there is a scene in which an Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agent, Sartana (Jessica Alba), pulls up Machete's file on her laptop and it shows that his nationality is Mexican and his race is Hispanic. This is another example of how race and ethnicity are conflated, confused, and misused and over-used to the point of losing meaning. Why is race in Machete so explosive that it triggered such a huge Internet response? Because there are people who believe very strongly in biological races and white supremacy. Though *Machete* blurs these lines, many filmgoers could only see the Network as brown and the

and his birth name are the same and that his race is Hispanic and his nationality is Mexican.

border vigilantes and right wing politicians as white. This is an inaccurate reading of the film, especially since the man behind the politician's border fence and the supplier of resources to the vigilantes is Mexican. However, the strong reactions to the film's portrayal of a group of people who fight against the vigilantes and the politicians, seeing it as a "race war," show how race is still seen as something that is real and as something that is pure enough to have divisions.

Current racial context

Sentiment about race and immigration fluctuate radically in popular opinion and culture in the United States, usually based on economic factors and demographic changes and reflected by media representation. Certain analytic trends have emerged as to why outbreaks of anti-immigrant sentiment occur; the most prominent posit a national crisis.[23] *Machete*, which was filmed in 2009 and came out in 2010, did so while the United States was facing a huge economic crisis. [24] Pair that with post 9/11 raciality, which rhetorically and ideologically conflated immigrants with terrorists in politics, news media, and popular culture, and what we end up with is the scapegoating and targeting of immigrant (and those who look like immigrant) populations.

Von and his henchman confront Luz at her secret artillery stash/Network office. Von's group is modeled after the Minuteman Project, a controversial anti-immigrant group which patrols the US/Mexico border.

Anti-immigrant sentiment took many forms, one of the more obvious being Arizona's SB1070. Supporters of the law, including the media, invoked the name of Robert Krentz, a white Arizona man who was allegedly murdered by an undocumented man in March 2010. However, two months later when a border vigilante group invaded an Arizona family home, killing Raul Flores and his nine-year old daughter Briseña and critically injuring wife and mother Gina, the media turned a blind eye.[25] While SB1070 stirred up protests and boycotts from immigrants rights advocates, it also motivated several other states to propose similar laws.

Aside from legal means, groups like the Minute Men, the KKK, and the Neo-Nazi group the Nationalist Socialist Movement[26] have, along with the Tea Party, organized anti-immigrant protests, marches, and rallies nationwide. Each group accuses Obama of promoting amnesty and demands more fortification of the borders. High profile politicians such as Rand Paul, Mark Kirk, Meg Whitman, and Jan Brewer also became notorious for being anti-immigrant mouthpieces. Though accused of lax immigration initiatives, under Obama there have been more deportations than under the Bush administration and Border Patrol and ICE raids are becoming more and more common.[27]

In *Machete* Von's group, accompanied by Senator McLaughlin, films themselves tracking down and shooting crossing migrants.

The rise of the Tea Party also impelled many moderate Republicans such as John McCain to recant or reconsider their agendas and campaigns in order to meet the approval and vote of the conservative constituency. And in the wake of SB1070, Arizona also wrote bill HB 2281 which would ban ethnic studies.[28] Thus, the film *Machete* exploited or, better yet, tapped into the anti-immigrant/ Chican@/ Latin@ political climate in the United States. But it is debatable whether Rodriguez did so in true exploitation style of making a quick buck.

Senator McLaughlin's over-the-top campaign commercial warns voters "Don't get caught on the wrong side of the fence."

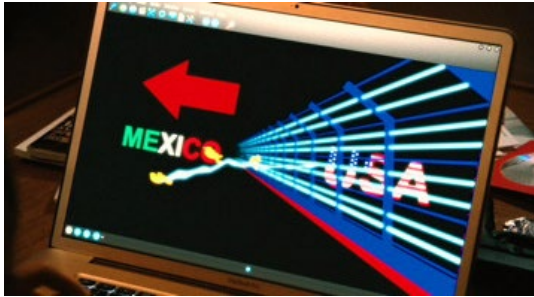McLaughlin's campaign ad likens migrants to cockroaches and maggots.

The border which Torrez and McLaughlin were planning to have built even wildlife would have to obey.

Booth's guards, all Hungarian, express their empathy regarding Mexican immigrants, "We let these people into our homes, watch our kids, park our cars, but we wont let 'em into our country. Does that make any sense to you?" As white characters, the guards are neither part of Von's anti-immigrant group or part of the Network. They exist in part for more centrist white audience members to identify with, meaning that by the end of the movie at the least, white audiences might question U.S. immigration policy.

Racial formation

Race is social and cultural rather than biological. But how is it shaped and formed in order to have signifiers attached to each color, each characteristic, each geographic location? Critical race studies have generally focused on Blackness and whiteness. The one-drop rule, slavery, freedom, biraciality, "passing," and anti-Black racism have been written about and analyzed at length. More recently whiteness studies have discussed whiteness outside of its relation to Blackness and have attempted to expose whiteness as several different things—such as property, privilege, and most importantly, something visible.[29] [open endnotes in new window]

Also recently biracial and multiracial studies have emerged and interrogated the Black/white binarism of critical race studies and looked at the implications of multiraciality. Gloria Anzaldúa's new Mestiza consciousness is a long-awaited theory which has been used extensively in Chican@ and Feminist studies to discuss the complicatedness of being a person descended from the Spanish colonizers and the Indigenous colonized people of Latin America. Anzaldúa, along with her colleagues, were able to discuss race and racial mixture in a Latin@ context. However, unlike the typical "white/Black in America" articles of critical race studies, her theory necessarily explores gender, sexuality, race, geography and the constructed borders between and among these identity markers as changeable and simultaneous. She discusses Chican@ identity in a way which de-centers race and citizenship. Even Mexicanidad isn't necessarily about being from Mexico:

"Being Mexican is a state of soul - not one of mind, not one of citizenship. Neither eagle nor serpent, but both. And like the ocean, neither animal respects borders."

To analyze how race is "formed" has been foundational for critical race studies as it has helped track how perceptions of race are constructed and how racial hierarchies function to oppress people perceived to be of color or Jewish. An important factor in looking at race is recognizing that the penalties applied to people of color are done so when they are perceived to be of color. Thus, while mixed-race, multiracial, biracial, and people who are not-white may identify as "a person of color," if they are not perceived to be, they may benefit from white privilege in certain circumstances. Whiteness scholars have described white privilege as how whites benefit from living in a white-centric and white supremacist country. These benefits include historical legal benefits such as being in a family line allowed to own property, perceived as nonthreatening, represented in the media and in politics, and able to buy band-aids, wear nylons, and use crayons in "skin color" that matches their skin.[30]

Sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant wrote their foundational work, *Racial Formation in the United States* in opposition to the assimilationism of ethnicity theory. They argue that ethnicity theory did not take into account that which keeps some ethnic groups from

Dishwashers watch immigration news. News stories which depict brown faces when discussing immigration is an example of a racial project.

Booth's wife and daughter are two white characters in the film who are juxtaposed with Machete based on gender rather than race. This frame depicts one of the most sexual scenes in the film wherein the two women are starring in their own porno and think Machete is their co-star. Machete uses the opportunity to get back at Booth by leaving him the videotape of the encounter.

The character Julio is racially white but culturally Mexican and fights against the white anti-immigrant vigilantes.

assimilating fully to hegemonic "Americanness" due to the equation of Americanness with whiteness. Omi and Winant argue that though race is not inherent, biological, or essential, color-blind policies which aim to deny race's existence only strengthen its effect. Their theory of "racial formation" traces the "sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed."[31] They describe how race is formed and transformed through racial projects "in which human bodies and social structures are represented and organized."[32] Racial projects can be large-scale, institutional, ideological or individual and can be racist or not, but they are always at work. A major historical example of a racial project was the European conquest of the Americas wherein the "discoverers" began the project of categorical social reorganization of humans, in this case a hierarchical one.

In contemporary culture, blogs and especially their comments fora are textbook racial projects as the conversations, language used, and exchanges shape, reshape, and reflect interpretations of what race is and how it is discussed. In this light, Lisa Nakamura's groundbreaking books *Cybertypes*[33] and *Digitizing Race*[34] have effectively disproved that the Internet is a raceless utopia, finding instead that the Internet is not only a place where "race happens" but is part of racial formation, what Nakamura calls "digital racial formation."

Digital racial formation thus points to racial projects which occur on the Internet. For example, exchanges on a blog comment forum may begin with "trolling," but each conversation can potentially inform someone of a term or an idea they had never heard before.[35] In this way, when on a basically apolitical film site a comment like "all jews should be shot" pops up within a discussion of a movie with absolutely no references to Jewish people, the comment has causes and effects.[36] Though this comment was most likely made in jest by a film fan who found racial discourse inappropriate on AICN (Ain't it Cool News), it is still undeniably violent.

The fact that the commenter chose to introduce Jewish people into a conversation about people of color may show that there has been a relaxation in the acceptability of anti-Semitism as the popular culture version of "Jewish" is white (such as Jerry Seinfeld). Race and whiteness are often spoken about as being at-odds with one another, as in, one is either of a certain race or someone is white. But Daniel Bernardi has pointed out in his writings on whiteness and Hollywood that their meanings are linked or paired by being at-odds with one another. Race is defined against whiteness thus they are interdependent.[37] Bernardi says that whiteness is constructed and represented in Hollywood but that though present, it is also "absent" as it is taken for granted and invisible.

Like many whiteness scholars, Bernardi is critical of whiteness, whether in its mediated forms or IRL (in real life), when it is portrayed as the default state. An oft-used example of the default state of whiteness is the avatar used in video games and many Internet sites, whether it be a whole person or just a hand (as in some shooting games). It is when whiteness stands as an unquestioned norm that academics, scholars and activists point out the

By including representation of migrant populations including (male) day laborers, gardeners, paleteros, and dishwashers, as well as characters with the cultural markers of Chican@ness such as pachucas, 'homies,' and low rider culture, director Robert Rodriguez was partially making this film for these underrepresented populations to watch. In fact, in terms of the marketing of the film, Rodriguez and the cast handed out tacos from a "Machete" Taco Truck at Comicon and he and the cast rode up to the film premiere in low riders.

Fanboy types watched the film exclusively for the explosions, sex and gore.

Here Machete uses the gun with the hand he just chopped off still attached to shoot more gunmen in the opening sequence set in Mexico.

inherent racism of the positioning of people of color as different or aberrant. Whiteness scholars are quick to point out that whiteness is an invisible, taken for granted privilege. But even such a critique which traces the difficulty of the racial project of making the invisible visible, as Sara Ahmed points out,

> "may come in part from a sense that the project of making whiteness visible only makes sense from the point of view of those for whom it is invisible."[38]

Though Rodriguez's *Machete* depicts the border vigilantes as stereotypical white rednecks, they are not the only white people in the film. White characters also include politicians, laborers, and members of the Network, which alters the stark divisions made by critics and past exploitation films. As depicted in the film, whiteness and race are much less simple then being either/or, default or aberrant, or necessarily at-odds with one another. In reality and in popular culture race and whiteness are mixed up, complex, and often arbitrarily determined. More and more Latin@/Chican@ youth are born into culturally, racially and generationally mixed families, thus going beyond bicultural/biracial and first generation and entering into tricultural/triracial, fourth and fifth generation, Afro-Latin@, Mestiz@, Hapa, and more.

Machete is an example of how a fictional narrative can just throw people together and not explain how Mexican they are, or if they are citizens or not, and just let the audience decide who is who. It is in the audience reception that we are able to see how people read the character's races, ethnicities, and nationalities, and how they did so tells us more about the "reader" than it does the characters. Since so much reception is based around a white/Mexican binary, it is telling that mixture, in a number of forms, is still something that racial formation is grappling with.

The Internet as audience

The Internet is a vast network with seemingly endless forms of social discourse about a wide array of topics. The rhetoric found on the internet is rich in information about how people think and talk about race in their reactions to news and entertainment.

According to Fox, *Machete* was being marketed to "the Latino community."[40] It is important to note that I am discussing the reception on the Internet, a luxury which not all people have access to, much less use regularly. In fact, according to a 2010 report by the Pew Research Center, only 45% of Latino adults had access to broadband Internet last year (Meanwhile, 65% of white adults and 52% of black adults had access).[41] Therefore, I would not claim that digital reception can be looked at as representative of all populations, but that in the case of the film *Machete* since there was a digital eruption about racialism and racism, it deserves to be looked at. Further, as the film was promoted in large part on the Internet via the fake trailer, Internet advertising, and video and print interviews online, the film's viewership was already limited in large part to those with Internet access.

Though Fox aimed to target "hispanic audiences," the people taking notice of the film have been political extremists, Rodriguez fans, and left

During the final war between the Network and the vigilantes, the Network side was joined by all types, including this *paletero* that trailed behind the others.

Members of the Network killed the vigilantes in very creative ways.

academics, activists, and writers. The characters in the film, migrant border crossers, dishwashers, gardeners, and day laborers are not the main demographic viewing the film and thus not filtering their own representations. Thus, the conversation about filmic representation in the digital sphere ends up focusing less on class and migrant status and more on race.

In order to focus within the vast network of materials on the Internet which referred to the film *Machete*, I will be describing and quoting from a few specific forums, each of which I chose to be representative of a certain general reaction from Internet audiences. The comments sections of the respective reference and rating sites the Internet Movie Database (IMDB) [42] and Rotten Tomatoes[43] represent folks who enjoy and often take very seriously the rating, reviewing, and/or critiquing of movies. Since *Machete* caused such a racially charged stir on the Internet, the sites both attracted users who may not normally post on them as well as caused apolitical established users to engage in political/racial discussions. These sites are an important sample as each site has no raciopolitical agenda whatsoever; an average entry reads the film for things such as plot development, character dimension, and professional quality. Additionally, I am quoting from a conversation between two contributors on the pop culture blog Racialicious in order to represent anti-racist concerns and views about the film. Since this blog does center on race, it represents how the film might appear when looking through a racial lens which rejects the idea that whiteness is the norm or supreme "race."

The next two samples are from the articles and comments sections at Ain't it Cool News (AICN), a newsite for TV, DVD and comic book news; and "conspiracy king" Alex Jones's two websites, Info Wars and Prison Planet. These two sites' user demographics represent polarized viewpoints on the film. AICN (Ain't it Cool News) is ran by Harry Knowles, a fan of Rodriguez. Knowles' readers are generally also pre-existing fans of gore, Rodriguez, or film in general. Like Rotten Tomatoes and IMDB (The Internet Movie Database) this site is generally not a forum for political or racial conversations, but AICN uniquely brings in a more "fanboy" audience which includes "Comic-Con" goers; fans who might go so far as to buy several versions of the DVD, posters, and action figures; and viewers who generally read the film in relation to other Rodriguez films or other films in the exploitation genre rather than see it in terms of plot, politics, or race.

Alex Jones and his readership, however, whether or not they actually watched the film, responded to it with pre-existing anti-immigrant biases. Jones's two websites are overtly focused on politics and are much more pre-occupied with the film's effects on viewers then anything else. To Jones and his readership, the film's "message" may actually cause racially motivated violence, and thus its reception is loaded with fear and anger. I have found that the anonymity of Internet posting with "handles" has allowed for a startling amount of exaggerated hate speech, violent threats, and disrespectful language. This is certainly the case in the way commenters responded to *Machete*, though further study would be necessary to determine if the people posting these insults and threats use similar language in real life (commonly abbreviated online as IRL).

Lastly, looking at the race-focused pop-culture blog Racialicious, I intend to show how the film *Machete* is discussed with an anti-racist racial lens.

Racialicious is run by Latoya Peterson, a self-described anti-racist feminist media junkie; it is run by a team of about 10 writers and editors though it also accepts submissions. Unlike Ain't it Cool News, the blog is overtly political, and unlike Info Wars and Prison Planet it is overtly left-leaning.

The Internet Movie Database (IMDB) and Rotten Tomatoes

The Internet Movie Database (IMDB) has become a go-to for movie consumers to see what a movie is about, what actors are in it, and what other movies or television shows an actor has been in. IMDB also has a lot of other uses, such as a user generated 1-10 star rating system. It can also be used to look up a director or producer's CV, find quotes from movies, and have discussions about TV shows or films with other IMDB members. Rotten Tomatoes has also become a one-stop reference point for filmgoers. It uses a "Tomatometer" to indicate a rating percentage from 0-100 by either all critics or top critics and another rating percentage from audience members. Rotten Tomato users can read reviews by droves of Internet, magazine, blog, and newspaper film critics, top professional critics, and audience members who write in amateur critic style. Each of these websites are used by a wide audience as cinematic reference points.

Unlike other blogs and websites, IMDB does not have a review of the film and then allow comments. It simply has a very basic synopsis; then users can either review the movie or have conversations on message boards of their own making. A quick look at IMDB shows that *Machete* has a star rating of 6.9, 333 user reviews, and five pages of message board conversation topics. Message boards cover a range of topics such as the portrayal of Catholicism; the rating and discussion of the actresses bodies; the music the film's liberalness, stupidity, or humor or lack thereof. The review section focuses largely on plot, character development and quality of acting. For example one reviewer spent several paragraphs critiquing how many minutes each character had of screen time and how many minutes were devoted to action. Another reviewer criticized the casting of Steven Seagal due to his weight gain.

Rotten Tomatoes, a widely-used reference site, earned a 73% on its Tomatometer from critics, and a 64% from audience members. The site has 174 reviews of the film by professional and amateur movie critics, 26 of which are hosted on the film's main page, half good (fresh) and half bad (rotten). This site, unlike sites with comments boards, does not foster conversations, exchanges, or arguments as the critics each wrote reviews independent of the other reviews. The reviews generally make similar critiques, that the film was "repetitive," "messy," "crudo," or "lack[ing] in subtlety." Most all reviewers, if they did have something good to say, said the film was "fun." More than anywhere else, probably due to the lack of exchange on the site, Rotten Tomatoes did not have comments about the film's politics as correct or incorrect, just a general consensus among critics that the politics were too simple, and too obvious.

Torrez points to the knife wound in his stomach and says "this ain't shit." One IMDB-er was unhappy that Seagal was out of shape.

One of the cruder scenes in the film shows Machete grabbing the intestine of a man right out of his stomach and using it to swing out the window from one floor to the next.

McLaughlin holds a press conference condemning Machete's alleged violence in the city and is ambushed by footage of Booth admitting to admitting to the shooting of the Senator being a set-up and the links with

Alex Jones and Ain't it Cool News

The next sites I am discussing seemed to have a direct conversation with each other over *Machete*. Alex Jones, is a loud mouth white Libertarian with a number of websites, the main ones being Infowars[44] [open endnotes in new window] and Prison Planet[45] and a six-day-a-week Austin, TX-based independent radio show with an estimated million listeners a day.[46] Jones's conspiracy theories about such things as 9/11 being an inside job, FEMA running concentration camps, and the government poisoning the water to dumb down the population are what Nightline has dubbed "paranoia porn." In this light, many news outlets have linked violent incidents including an assassination attempt on the President to Jones' fans.[47] On the Infowars site Jones' bio includes the fact that he defends "our nation's borders," which, paired with his Austin location, makes the film *Machete* a high interest case for this "conspiracy king."[48] Jones found the film *Machete* threatening enough to devote articles, interviews, and Youtube videos warning of its anti-white racism. A reader of "pro-white" news site White News Now said in relation to Jones and *Machete*, "I'm normally not a big fan of Alex Jones, but it seems like this movie has maybe stirred a spark of white identity in him..."[49] pointing to the fact that whiteness is not a primary theme of Jones's media.

The second site, Ain't it Cool News, is a movie gossip and fanboy website run by now notorious Harry Knowles. Knowles says he started the site in 1996 to leak information from insider sources about movies that were in production or in pre-screening, much to the public ire of filmmakers.[50] Since its inception Knowles has been embraced by studios and provided information and invited to pre-screenings, but Knowles insists that he still remains unbiased in his reviews of the films. The website is one of the most infamous sites for film reviews, spoilers and gossip and has even been parodied in the film *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back* (Smith, 2001). Knowles, once just seen as a white, nerdy red headed college dropout on a computer, has since become known as a movie critic whose reviews can make or break a film. Though his site is not overtly political about anything but the freedom to provide the public with information, his name is published online as being a contributor to the 2008 Barack Obama campaign.[51]

The back and forth over *Machete* began when Ain't it Cool News published what director Robert Rodriguez called the "illegal" trailer for *Machete* on May 5, 2010. According to Harry Knowles, Rodriguez and actor Danny Trejo dropped the trailer off at his house after talking Fox into allowing them to put together a "Cinco de Mayo message for ARIZONA" (sic).[52] Knowles' small write-up that accompanies the trailer calls the forthcoming film a "silly fun project" that is "real exploitation at its height," noting, "that shit was pulled straight out of the headlines, even sometimes slightly before they were the headlines." The trailer begins with Trejo saying, "This is Machete with a special Cinco de Mayo message...to Arizona!" and then cuts to scenes of a violent border battle. The trailer ends with Machete

Torrez. Senator McLaughlin and Booth look on.

One small vignette in the film is Booth showing this cheesy commercial so as to prove to Torrez how Booth is going to ensure Machete's death. It is parts of the film like this that are made for the type of viewers who read Aint It Cool News.

Machete leads the Network army to what Alex Jones considers a "race war" that could evoke something similar in real life.

Rodriguez claims the film isn't political, but as illustrated in the above scene, he is pointing to certain solvable social problems.

soaring through the air on a motorcycle that shoots bullets with an explosion behind him. The narrator says in reference to the politicians and vigilantes who were trying to kill Machete, "They soon realized- they just fucked with the wrong Mexican." The post had 275 pages of comments (and counting) of back-and-forth polarized insults against Rodriguez, Arizona, immigrants and other commenters.

Some themes that emerged were the wishing harm upon Harry Knowles, best exemplified by jeditemple's comment "fuck your politics harry. I hope you get raped by mexicans." Other themes were angry and often violent exchanges between commenters who identified each other as "liberal" or "rednecks." For example, ron2112 mentioned in a comment, "The left is really making asses of themselves," and mattheius2783 commented that people who didn't agree with SB1070 were "liberal idiots." Meanwhile ptsdpete commented, "STFU and die, Redneck Teabagger Scum," and quantize commented,"stupid redneck cunts who DO NOT GET IT." Another theme asked if Ain't it Cool News (AICN) was meant for liberal readers. One comment asked, "there are still conservatives who read this site?" and another said, "I didn't realize so there were so many white trash, rednecks on this site." One comment said, "as much as it pains you libs, conservative do read AICN." Though there were many different responses to the trailer/blogpost, many of which were just jokes and insults, one last theme I want to mention questions if AICN is a place for a political debate. Boogieboy said, "fucking idiots discussing politics on a film site," and turd_has_risen_from_the_grave asked,

> "Who'd have thought that a silly exploitation movie could inspire such fervent political debate?"

Rhetorically, commenters exchanged words in a clearly uncensored, over-the-top, extreme way. Hurled insults and threats seemed casual. However, what one can glean from the comments is that AICN and Knowles himself are left-leaning, that anti-immigrant "conservatives" get labeled as white rednecks, and that commenters do not find film review sites appropriate places for political debates. Additionally, as many comments which simply posted apolitical positive responses to the trailer/blog such as "Rodriguez for God," this overtly political film is easily seen by some, as Knowles puts it, as just a "silly fun project." Interestingly, the strongest language used in the comment forum was directed against white people, against Knowles for his liberal politics and "rednecks" for their conservative politics. The language used did not insult or threaten anyone because of their race or color, but it did assume that "rednecks" are ignorant. Here the slur points to class rather than any essential white characteristic.

In an impressively rapid response, Alex Jones coauthored a three-page article on his Infowars site four days later, on May 9, 2010, arguing that the film "evokes race war" and could hinder the "long history of co-mingling and harmony among white and hispanic populations" in Mexico and Texas. Jones' grossly inaccurate account of harmonious white/Hispanic "co-mingling" and Texas-U.S. history provides him with the basis of his argument: that the film has the power to ruin racial harmony and incite racial violence. Considering that several of Jones's articles on his sites defend his own documentaries from being censored for inciting violence, he ironically then accuses the film *Machete* of doing exactly that. The article also sys the film glorifies violence against white Americans and quotes two crew members of the film "who happened to be hispanic" who feared the film "could cause a cultural backlash and do harm to the otherwise positive image of the hispanic community." In fact, as Charles

Luz/Shé and her Network.

Ramirez Berg, Rosa Linda Fregoso, and Chon Noriega painstakingly outline, Chican@ and Latin@ representation is so regularly underrepresented and stereotyped negatively most of the time, that simply saying that there is a "positive image" does not make it so.

When I first visited Jones' article, it had pages upon pages of comments; the site now says "comments are closed" and there are none. However, the comments are not dissimilar to those on the following articles, comments which I did manage to save before they were taken down.

Ten days later, on May 19, 2010, AICN released a new blogpost with an exclusive interview with Robert Rodriguez stating, "the truth about *Machete*" is that the trailer was a fake and was "cut...to make it look like the entire film was about Machete leading a revolt against anti-immigrant politicians and border vigilantes" when that is not what the film is really about.[53] "What can I say," he says, "it was Cinco de Mayo and I had too much tequila." In the interview Rodriguez self-identifies as being fourth-generation Mexican American, asserting it as a sort of street cred for understanding "both sides," explaining that there is corruption on either side of the border in the film and that the villain is Mexican. He downplays the "fake" trailer, saying it is satire. "It's just a damn fun movie," Rodriguez says, going on to compare the film's sense of reality with Tarantino's *Inglorious Basterds* (2009).[54] When prompted about his thoughts on Arizona, he responds, "zzzzzzz," expressing boredom at the question, then says he doesn't believe in marches, protests or rallies, stating that "the real power is in voting" for "comprehensive immigration reform." Such advice is peculiar, considering that the people most affected by immigration reform cannot vote in the United States.

Some of my own thoughts on this interview are reflected in the comments. For example, ebonic_plague said, "RR's vague answer [was] probably due to studio pressure," and neo zeed said, "Sounds like Rodriguez is feeling the backlash." Indeed, Alex Jones stirred up quite a storm and Rodriguez most likely was tired of the bad press. There were posts on the Internet of various cities planning protests of the film, one group even claiming that they were "bringing their own machetes."[55] Additionally dozens of websites and news sites picked up on Jones's articles and videos about the trailer, many of them angrily agreeing with Jones's idea about the film's inciting a race war. The rest of the comments to the interview were again full of insults, this time mostly directed at Rodriguez; commenters were either disappointed there was no race war or were Jones fans saying things such as, "9/11 was an inside job."

Five days later Alex Jones's Info Wars site had a response. "Robert Rodriguez Backpedals on His 'Message to Arizona'[56] read the title of Amy di Miceli's article, though the first sentence added that he was also "pathetic" and "arrogant." She argues that "it matters not" if the trailer becomes something other than it appears because his "racist propaganda piece cannot be undone." This article did not have much else to say and seemed unsure of about how to react: first seeing the trailer as evoking a race war only to find out it was a joke. I find it telling that Alex Jones himself failed to comment on the fact. Once again, this article closed its comments. Come September 5, 2010, when the film came out, it seemed to vindicate Jones in his original position. He once again coauthored an article, this time on Prison Planet, entitled "'Machete' Producers Lied About Racist Bloodbath."[57] The article states that the film portrays
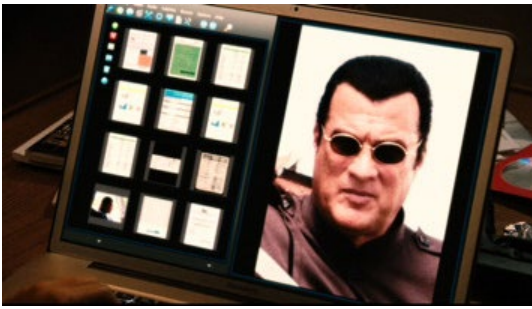
Alex Jones fails to notice that the main villain of the film is Mexican.

Von's henchman shows his humanity by vomiting after Von shoots Luz in the eye.

In this scene the white senator is going to be shot by the white vigilantes. Unlike Alex Jones's accusation, the film does not simply pit white against brown as exemplified here. Senator McLaughlin is being punished for the "treason" of paying Machete to shoot him.

Southerners as racist stereotypes and Minute Men as "sub-human animals who hunt and murder illegals." He says there has not been "such an openly racist film in America since...the pro KKK 'Birth of a Nation.'[58] He also focuses on tax incentives that the film "had practically already been assured,"[59] and questions if the film might glorify a "'Reconquista' view" of the United States.[60]

Jones accuses the film of pitting whites and Latin@s against each other and states that it was "dripping with hate." However, the protagonists and antagonists in the film are more complicated than simply white and Latin@. Class plays the largest part in the groupings of characters: the white minute-men types are seemingly of the same class status as much of the "network" of multiethnic dishwashers, gardeners and jornaleros. The other groups are also made up of both Brown and white people such as the drug boss, Torrez, who is Mexican but working with the white Senator's men; and the hero, Machete, who is also Mexican but working with the Mexican Americans Luz and Sartana alongside the multiethnic "network." The network, though implicitly endless, consists of a few main characters, the dishwashers, the homeboys, the hospital staff, seemingly all gardeners shown, and the scores of brown faces who come out from the woodwork for the final battle. Thus, there is not a clear white=bad, brown=good set up as Jones suggests. Even the "bad guy" vigilante group is portrayed as having human feelings as one of the characters vomits each time someone is shot.

Unlike the comments on AICN, the comments on the September 5 Prison Planet article were all in support of the article save for one. The discussion took for granted that the film was "anti-white hate propaganda" and a large portion of the comments discussed which weapons they either already had or were going to get in order to be ready for the Latin@ uprising. Several commenters feared that the target audience of the film, "Hispanic" and "illiterate mestizo Latins," are "very impressionable and will believe just about anything they see on screen" so there would be no avoiding the race war that Jones was predicting. Other commenters agreed a race war was impending but were pleased that the film would bring it at a quicker rate and would garner more support for the white "empire." And though the basic themes of the comments had to do with Latin@/white relations, a few said anti-Black phrases. One comment by ranger labeled Obama, "the community organizer," and said that Obama and all blacks want a "black controlled USA."

This is an example of *Black* being a pseudo-synonym for *race*. It is very rare that people talk about "race" without at least mentioning Blackness, at least as a historical reference. Even Alex Jones alluded to *Birth of a Nation* when discussing *Machete* as an example of a movie that incited racialized violence. One last comment that caught my eye was,

> "We can expect more and more of these sort of movies because whites will never complain for fear of being labeled racist."

However, considering the loud opposition engendered by the film, this is clearly untrue.

Racialicious

Cheech Marin's character as Machete's priest brother. Marin's important film *Born in East LA* easily paved the way for other social problem films about present immigration issues.

Racialicious[61] [open endnotes in new window] is a blog "about the intersection of race and pop culture" and a "critique of questionable media representations." The "Racialicious Review of Machete" was a conversation between Latino managing editor Arturo R. García, who usually covers "the geekier side of the spectrum" and Asian American Deputy Editor Thea Lim, an "anti-imperialist Third Culture Kid."[62]

García begins by critiquing the exploitation genre choice as a vehicle for a political message, stating that setting out to make "an 'intentionally bad' movie" sets you up as an "unreliable narrator." Lim, on the other hand likes the idea of bringing the issue of immigration to an audience that won't go see documentaries about it and will cheer up audiences affected by it. Lim's argument echoes that made by Cheech Marin in reference to *Born in East LA*:

> "The best way to make a statement is you slip it in the coffee so that don't taste it, but they get the effect."[63]

This is the exchange between Sartana and Luz that qualified them for the Bechdel test since they are two female characters who talk about something other than a man.

Though Lim said the film seemed to be for a target audience of Rodriguez fans and people against SB1070, García said that he didn't enjoy the film even though he is both: he wanted either "full on camp" or "a fully realized action thriller." Lim speculates,

> "I have to wonder how much, in a sense, coming out as a politicized Chican@ in this film, affected the quality of his film."

But Rodriguez has remained tight-lipped about Chicanismo and has never really come out as Chicano. Even in his interview with AICN he self identifies as "4th generation Mexican-American" rather than Chicano. However, it is unclear, as Lim imagines, how Rodriguez's coming out might excuse cinematic "lower quality." If indeed the film were meant to be a semi-personal coming out, then the film's not resolving the problems associated with immigration reveal where Rodriguez stood politically at the time of it's making. Perhaps a lack of a long-term vision for revolution could have affected the quality of the plot.

Luz re-appears at the end of the film sans one eye for *la revolución*. Though Lim and Garcia

The two reviewers go on to analyze more than just the racial, ethnic, and national aspects of the film to agree that its gender politics were "half-assed," though the only examples they gave were to mention Alba's "Sexy Cop" outfit and the plot's lack of closure for Luz. Perhaps anyone who watched *Machete*, myself included, might critique its gender politics, although the film did pass the woman-centered, Internet-based "Bechdel test."[64] Does the film have three dimensional female characters? Does it contain overt sexualization of

say her character doesn't get "closure," there really isn't anything to get. She begins as an independent character who leads the Network, and implicitly continues her work.

Luz, an immigrant rights superhero.

The Network in action: gardeners, construction workers, dishwashers, and other workers stop everything to spread important news. Though fictional, there are many real life networks wherein people let each other know about raids, checkpoints, and other news.

Unity among the Network.

the female character's bodies. It certainly has sex scenes unnecessary to the storyline other than to make Machete even more macho, and yes, as Lim points out, Luz gets the shaft, in that though she is the ultimate strong three-dimensional woman of color, her storyline has no closure

If the reviewers were to change anything about the film, García said he would have liked Mexico to be shown with "indoor plumbing and paved streets," for Luz to have given the speech declaring "we didn't cross the border, the border crossed us" instead of Sartana, and for the "redheaded cholo" to die. Lim said she would have liked to see other immigrant communities of color and could have done without Torrez's Asian fetish.[65] This conversation was entertaining for me as it resembles many thoughts and conversations I have had. However, I was surprised that García was so staunchly opposed to the film for what seemed to be no good reason. He kept insisting that Rodriguez has done a better job at portraying Mexico in past films and that this film just "wasn't clever."

Lim, on the other hand, sounded critical of the gender presentations, hopeful about Rodriguez's intentions as a politicized filmmaker, and even happy to see the redheaded "mixed culture" kid, Julio, whom García wanted dead. I found it interesting and distasteful that García wanted Julio to die, especially since the reason was simply that "he bugged" García. This is an extreme reaction to a character who has little signifying factors besides his light complexion. García's overemphasis on the portrayal of Mexico and de-emphasis on the characters and politics in the film or even the portrayal of revolution made the critical conversation seem like it was between a feminist and a Mexican nationalist rather than two pop-culture race theorists.

Conclusion

Hollywood & Fine, Ain't it Cool News, Racialicious, and Alex Jones's websites offer just four examples of how the Internet can collect and store valuable cultural data. Each of these sites and every person behind them has their own definition and opinion about race and whiteness. All groups here should be looked at with a critical eye. In watching *Machete* I was inspired to think through my seemingly contradictory states of being white, Mexican American, Chicana and a woman. The character of Luz (Michelle Rodriguez) became my new hero as she was Mexican American, a believer in revolution, and a leader. Also, as an activist and an educator in my local day labor community I am pleased that jornaleros are shown at all. However, the film's camera angles, character arcs and sexualization of two female protagonists were nothing short of a disappointment. Similarly, the lack of character development of the other jornaleros besides Machete shows that this film provides just the beginning of what it might look like to humanize ignored populations.

Additionally, *Machete* was *jornlero*-centric, completely leaving out *jornaleras* such as domestic workers. Machete has sex with a total of four women in the film, something in line with the exploitation genre but unrealistic and unnecessary to the plot. The film ends after the "revolution," which is more like a small-scale civil war, yet stops short of becoming "la revolucion" that Luz anticipated. Robert Rodriguez's

quote regarding Machete's character sums up his (and the film's) stance on xenophobic and racist immigration issues,

> "You create superheroes to take care of problems that can't really be solved another way."[66]

Thus, as Rodriguez is a nonbeliever in a solution, his film acts as an exaggerated pipe dream. However, I believe that though Rodriguez ultimately means the film to be an unrealistic, superhuman answer to real-life problems, he tapps into a real-life immigrant rights movement that does believe in varying levels of revolution and reform.

Aside from representations within the film, the digital reception of the film is telling in terms of where certain demographics are in terms of discussing race. Pitting action and gore fans against hard line anti-immigrant Libertarians and mixing that in with Chican@s and cinephiles of many political persuasions on the Internet, racial debates about film moved from Black and white to Brown and white. Only in Racialicious were the white and mixed heritage characters who were not part of the vigilante group even discussed, and the array of terminologies used only proved how seldom people have racial debates about Latin@s. Too often immigration debates claim not to be about race, but this time people had to talk about skin color, language, and culture as factors in anti-immigrant sentiment because *Machete* so blatantly put it out there. Though *Machete*'s reception has not been very far-reaching, it, like *Born in East L.A.*, has managed to bring a message to Hollywood, and people noticed, were forced to think about it, and responded to it. The racial project never really ends, but for Chican@/Latin@s, being seen as "raced" might just be beginning.

Go to Notes page

Notes

1. Though *Machete* had a fairly average gross of $14,102,888 for an action film its opening weekend, the gross plummeted 62% the next weekend, and 59% the weekend after that, and didn't stop falling. Box Office Mojo. "Machete." *Box Office Mojo.* 15 Nov. 2010. Web. 26 Aug. 2011. [return to page 1]

2. The border film, also known as cine fronterizo, is a Mexican film genre that though historically tied to exploitation cinema has of late been taken up by Hollywood filmmakers in the US such as Cheech Marin's *Born in East LA* (1987) and *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* (Jones, 2005) Though the "border" in *Machete* I am primarily referencing is the geographical Texas/Mexico borderlands in which the film takes place there certainly are more spiritual, cultural, identity-based, and other Anzaldúa n borders at play in the film.

3. "Jornalero" comes from the word "jornal," which comes from the Latin root "Diurnus," which means "day." A "jornal" is a single day's wage, or correspondingly, the work done for that wage. The idea that goes along with this is that a jornalero works from day-to-day with no security about the next day's work. This virtually guarantees a hand-to-mouth existence. At the same time that this circumstance comes from a disparity in status between worker and employer, the instability that the system generate reinforces and recreates that disparity.

Day work is one of the oldest documented professions. It is mentioned in the *Book of Exodus* (12:45) in the context of the Passover and the return from Egypt (jornaleros, understood to be 'foreigners,' are not permitted to eat the unleavened bread of the Passover ritual) and again in *Leviticus* (19:13), when the faithful are enjoined against abusing day laborers. Thus there is a long tradition dating back to Biblical times of both discrimination against (à la Exodus) and requiring justice for jornaleros, and that identity has long been tied up to ingroup/outgroup identities in respect to nationality and borders.

4. Stephen Holden. "Growl, and Let the Severed Heads Fall Where They May." *The New York Times.* 2 Sept. 2010. Web. Apr. 2011.

5. The film's first trailer was a fake trailer which preceded the Grindhouse films, *Planet Terror* (Rodriguez 2007) and *Death Proof* (Tarantino, 2007). It wasn't until later that Rodriguez decided to make *Machete* feature length.

6. Randal C. Archibold. "Arizona Enacts Stringent Law on Immigration." *The*

New York Times. 23 Apr. 2010: A1. Web. 15 Apr. 2011.

7. Curtis Pendergast. "Narratives in the News: SB 1070 Boycotts." *The Sonoran Chronicle.* 1 Apr. 2011. Web. 15 Apr. 2011.

8. The Mexico Trilogy or the Mariachi Trilogy follows the character of a Mariachi through three films, *El Mariachi*, (1992) *Desperado* (1995), and *Once Upon a Time in Mexico* (2003).

9. The comeback of the exploitation film can be seen as beginning with Rodriguez and Tarantino's *From Dusk till Dawn* (1996) and Tarantino's *Jackie Brown* (1997).

10. Rodriguez was surprised to find that audiences and Trejo himself pushed him to make the trailer into a feature length film. Christina Radish, "Robert Rodriguez and Danny Trejo Interview MACHETE." Collider. 29 Aug. 2010. Web. 18 Apr. 2011.

11. Cachadero is a slang term in Spanish for where day laborers "catch" jobs. It could be a corner, a site, a center, or in the case of the film *Machete* it is just an unmarked area.

12. Jim Gilchrist's Minuteman Project seeks to secure the US/Mexico border through "volunteers" who "man" the border to prevent border crossers.

13. Anthony Kwame Appiah, "Race." *Critical Terms for Literary Study*. 2nd ed. Eds. Lentricchia, Frank, and Thomas McLaughlin. Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 1995. Print.

14. Ibid. p. 276

15. Karim Murji, "Race." *New Keywords: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society* Eds. Bennett, Tony and Lawrence Grossberg. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing: 2005. Print.

16. Ibid. p. 291

17. Ibid. p. 294

18. The terms Chicano and Chicana have been debated about in terms of if they points to race, ethnicity or nationhood. Rosa Linda Fregoso answers the quandary of "whom to consider for membership into the Chicano nation" by "de-emphasizing the biological claims to authenticity, yet accentuating its political dimension." Charles Ramírez Berg said the term "implied pride as well as activism and oppositional politics."

19. Campbell Gibson, Kay Jung. "Historical Census Statistics on Population Totals By Race, 1790 to 1990, and By Hispanic Origin, 1970 to 1990, For The United States, Regions, Divisions, and States". Working Paper Series No. 56. Sept. 2002. Web. 18 Apr. 2011.
http://www.census.gov/population/www/
documentation/twps0056/twps0056.pdf

20. Ibid.

21. Karim Murji, "Ethnicity." *New Keywords: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society* Eds. Bennett, Tony and Lawrence Grossberg. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing: 2005. Print.

22. Much like the term "raza," the term "Aztlan" is not always necessarily literal, but is more of a mythological home.

23. Kevin R. Johnson. "Pursuing Equal Justice in the West: Driver's Licenses and Undocumented Immigrants: The Future of Civil Rights Law?" *Nevada Law Journal*. Feb 2004.

24. Though the character Machete was first imagined in 1993 when Robert Rodriguez was making *Desperado,* he never realized the script he had been writing until he made the fake trailer for *Grindhouse* in 2006. The film *Machete* was filmed in 2009 and 2010.
Ryan McKee. "The Origins of Machete: How Danny Trejo Went From Convict to Action Hero." *Next Movie*. Ed. Kevin Polowy, Breanne L. Heldman, and Brooke Tarnoff. N.p., 2 Sept. 2010. Web. 18 Mar. 2011.
Bruce Simmons. "Machete Filming has Wrapped." *Brusimm*. Ed. Bruce Simmons. N.p., 11 Aug. 2010. Web. 19 Mar. 2011.

25. Raul A. Reyes. "Brisenia Flores Was a Victim of Border Vigilantes and Media Indifference." *Huffington Post* 8 Mar. 2011. Web. 15 Apr. 2011.
Terry Green Sterling. "U.S. News More U.S. News The Minuteman Vigilante's Arizona Murder Trial." *The Daily Beast* 26 Jan. 2011. Web. 15 Apr. 2011.

26. Joe Tacopino. "Neo-Nazi groups take up arms in Arizona to combat illegal immigration." *NY Daily News* 18 July 2010. Web. 15 Apr. 2011.
Sarah Viets. "Neo-Nazi Activities Target Immigrants." *Imagine 2050*. Ed. Jill Garvey. N.p., 12 Mar. 2010. Web. 15 Apr. 2011.

27. Frank James. "Deportations Higher Under Obama Than Bush." *NPR*. 26 July 2010. 2 April 2011. Web.

28. Nicole Santa Cruz."Arizona bill targeting ethnic studies signed into law" *Los Angeles Times*. 12 May 2010. 5 April 2011. Web.

29. For more on this see:

- Cheryl I. Harris. "Whiteness as Property." *Harvard Law Review*, Vol. 106, No. 8, p. 1707, 1993; UCLA School of Law Research Paper No. 06-35.
- Peggy McIntosh. Excerpt from 1988 Working Paper #189, published in *Peace and Freedom*, July/August 1989; reprinted in *Independent School,* Winter 1990.
- bell hooks. "Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination." *Cultural Studies*. Eds. Lawrence Grossberg et al. London: Routledge, 1992: 338-342. [return to page 2]

30. Excerpt from McIntosh 1988 Working Paper #189, published in *Peace and Freedom*, July/August 1989; reprinted in *Independent School*, Winter

1990.

31. Ibid. 55

32. Ibid. 56

33. Lisa Nakamura. *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet*. New York: Routledge. 2002. Print.

34. Lisa Nakamura. *Digitizing Race:Visual Cultures on the Internet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 2008. Print.

35. People who say things solely to start fights or make trouble.

36. A comment by noiretblanc on AICN's May 5 article. This AICN reader's other comments on the site are strictly fangirl/boyish.

37. Daniel Bernardi, ed. *The Persistence of Whiteness: Race and Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*. Abingdon: Routledge. 2008. Print.

38. Sara Ahmed. "Declarations of Whiteness: The Non-Performativity of Anti-Racism." *Borderlands*, 3.2. (2004) Web.

40. Nikki Finke. "George Clooney's 'The American' Wins Weekend, Robert Rodriguez's 'Machete' #2, Drew Barrymore's 'Going The Distance' #5." *Deadline Hollywood*. Ed. Nikki Finke, Mike Fleming, Nellie Andreeva, and Tim Adler. Mail.com Media Corporation, 4 Sept. 2010. Web. 24 Mar. 2011.

41. Socioeconomic status factors greatly in these numbers as people with similar levels of education and salary tend to have similar access to the Internet regardless of race. Gretchen Livingston. "Pew Hispanic Center." *Latinos and Digital Technology*. Pew Research Center, Feb. 2011. Web. 24 Mar. 2011.

42. "Machete." Internet Movie Database. Amazon, Sept. 2010. Web. 19 May 2012. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0985694/>.

43. "Machete." Rotten Tomatoes. Flixter, Sept. 2010. Web. 19 May 2012. <http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/machete/>.

44. Alex Jones. Info Wars. Ed. Kurt Nimmo, Aaron Dykes, Marleigh Jones, and Matt Ryan. Free Speech Systems, LLC , n.d. Web. 13 Feb. 2011. http://www.infowars.com . [return to page 3]

45. Alex Jones. Prison Planet. Ed. Kurt Nimmo, Aaron Dykes, Marleigh Jones, and Matt Ryan. Free Speech Systems, LLC , Web. 13 Feb. 2011. http://www.prisonplanet.com/

46. Dan Harris. "Angry in America: Inside Alex Jones' World." *Nightline*. 2 Sept. 2010. Web. 5 Nov. 2011.

47. Dan Harris. "Angry in America: Inside Alex Jones' World." *Nightline*. 2

Sept. 2010. Web. 5 Nov. 2011.
William Yardley. "White House Shooting Suspect's Path to Extremism." *The New York Times*. 20 Nov. 2011: A13. Web. 22 Nov. 2011.

48. Anti-Defamation League, Center on Extremism. (2009). Special Report "Rage Grows in America: AntiGovernment Conspiracies."

49. Negative3. "New Robert Rodriguez movie promotes violence against White Americans." *White News Now*. 6 July 2010. Web. 5 Nov. 2011.

50. Lianne Hart and Elaine Dutka. "[This Guy is Driving Hollywood NUTS](http://articles.latimes.com/1997/aug/06/entertainment/ca-20007)!" *Los Angeles Times*. 6 Aug. 1997. Web. 5 Nov. 2011. http://articles.latimes.com/1997/aug/06/entertainment/ca-20007

51. "Obama for America." *Notable Names Database*. Soylent Communications. n.d. Web. 5 Nov. 2011.

52. Harry Knowles. "Hey Arizona, Don't Fuck With This Mexican... MACHETE has some Cinco De Mayo words for you!!! Now in 720p!" *Ain't it Cool News*. Ed. Jeremy Smith. Steadfast Networks, 5 May 2010. Web. 24 Mar 2011.

53. Harry Knowles. "A Family Friendly "Machete?" What do you mean no Race War? & A Secret Frazetta Project?? Exclusive Robert Rodriguez Interview!!" Ain't it Cool News. Ed. Jeremy Smith. *Steadfast Networks*, 19 May 2010. Web. 24 Mar 2011.

54. *Inglorious Basterds* is a fiction film about a team of Jewish American Nazi killers in World War II Germany.

55. Lauren Smiley. "White Nationalist Group To Protest 'Machete' Movie With Machetes This Weekend." *SF Weekly*. 31 Aug. 2010. Web. 13 April 2011.

56. Amy di Miceli. "'Robert Rodriguez Backpedals on His 'Message to Arizona'." *Info Wars*. Ed. Kurt Nimmo, Aaron Dykes, Marleigh Jones, and Matt Ryan. Free Speech Systems, LLC, 24 May 2010. Web. 14 Mar 2011.

57. Jones, Alex, and Aaron Dykes. "'Machete' producers lied about racist bloodbath ." *Prison Planet*. Ed. Paul J. Watson, Steve Watson, Kurt Nimmo, and Aaron Dykes. Free Speech Systems, LLC, Sept. 2010. Web. 14 Mar. 2011.

58. Whether or not a film is overtly racist is subjective, however I personally believe *Birth of a Nation* is hardly the last overtly racist film.

59. The tax incentives to which he is referring were going to be from Texas for filming there, but were eventually denied, allegedly for portraying Texans in a negative light.
Martin Bartlett. "Texas' denial of incentives to 'Machete' likened to censorship." KVUE 9 Dec 2010. Web. Mar 23 2011.

60. A "reconquista" view or a "reconquer" view of the U.S. refers to the so-called "Aztlan conspiracy" which is based on the literal interpretation of the1969 document the "Plan Espiritual de Aztlan" which argued that Chicanos

should "reclaim the land of their birth." Many nativist groups believe that this is a blueprint for a coming war by Chicanos to "reconquer" the Southwest. Southern Poverty Law Center. *Intelligence Report*, Summer 2007, Issue Number: 101.

61. Arturo R. García and Thea Lim. "Table For Two: The Racialicious Review of Machete." Racilicious. Ed. Latoya Peterson and Thea Lim. N.p., 10 Sept. 2010. Web. 14 Mar. 2011. [return to page 4]

62. A Third Culture Kid is according to David C. Pollock, a person who has spent a significant part of [their] developmental years outside the parents' culture. The TCK frequently builds relationships to all of the cultures, while not having full ownership in any." David C. Pollock and Ruth E. Van Reken. *Third Culture Kids: Growing Up Among Worlds*. Boston: Nicholas Brealey Publishing. 1999. Print.

63. Chon A. Noriega. "'Waas sappening?' Narrative structure and iconography in Born in East L.A." *Keyframes: Popular Cinema and Cultural Studies* . Ed. Matthew Tinkcom and Amy Villarejo. New York: Routledge. 2001. Print.

64. To pass the test the film must have at least two women in it who talk to each other about something besides a man. "Machete 2010." Bechdel Test Movie List. bechdeltest.com.

65. Throughout the film Torrez is flanked by a silent Asian woman who is sexualized and styled in an Orientalized manner.

66. Christina Radish. "Robert Rodriguez and Danny Trejo Interview MACHETE." Collider.com. 29 Aug. 2010. Web. 15 Apr. 2011.

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Postmodern geekdom as simulated ethnicity

by Kom Kunyosying and Carter Soles

The pairing of schlubby geeks with classically beautiful women who are "out of their league" has become a standard trope in geek-centered shows like *The Big Bang Theory* and films like *Superbad* and *Knocked Up*.

 "I think that everything I do tends to root for the underdog. I always felt as a kid that I was under appreciated, invisible or weird, but I've always secretly thought people would one day appreciate what is different about me. I'm always putting that message out there. Eventually, the nerds and the geeks will have their day."
— Judd Apatow, from his imdb.com Biography

"If this was fifteen thousand years ago, by virtue of his size and strength, Kurt would be entitled to his choice of females. ... But our society has undergone a paradigm shift. In the Information Age, Sheldon, you and I are the Alpha males. We shouldn't have to back down."
— Leonard (Johnny Galecki) on CBS' *The Big Bang Theory*

Geek culture dominates popular media. Comic-book films like *Iron Man*, *The Dark Knight* (both 2008) and *The Avengers* (2012) are among Hollywood's highest-grossing blockbusters, while geek/slacker comedies like *Superbad* and *Knocked Up* (both 2007) are runaway R-rated comedy hits. The San Diego Comic-Con, once merely the largest annual meeting of a fairly obscure comic-collecting subculture, has become a major pop cultural event where A-list actors and directors make lengthy appearances to communicate with fans in an effort to generate buzz for their films and television programs. Best Buy, a dominant technology retailer, offers to send a Geek Squad to your house to help you with technology installation without having to wonder if anyone finds a squad of geeks unsettling. Books like *Geek Chic: The Ultimate Guide to Geek Culture* and *How to Date a Geek* have begun to journalistically analyze and capitalize on the phenomenon.

Katherine Heigl and Seth Rogen, featured in *Knocked Up*'s romantic pairing of a beautiful, ambitious career woman with a geeky, overweight slacker. Rogen's slackerish qualities serve as authenticating features which make him sympathetic and imbue his character with a non-threatening, yet rakish masculinity in the postmodern mediascape.

The economic successes of geek businessmen like Steve Jobs and Bill Gates are also primary sources of current geek predominance. These real-life geek success stories are so influential that they resonate on the pop-cultural front as well: for example, recent summer blockbuster *Iron Man 2* (2010) has Tony Stark giving rock star keynote addresses at Stark Expos in a thinly veiled reference to Steve Jobs strutting his stuff at Mac Expos. The film also includes Justin Hammer as an emphatically plagiaristic and sub-par competitor of Stark's, alluding to Bill Gates' capitalizing on Macintosh's windowed graphic user interface to create Microsoft Windows, as well as the popular notion that Windows-based PCs are substandard when compared with more expensive Macs. Jobs' and Gates' inclusion in *Iron Man 2* drives home that the celebration of geeks in media is connected to actual geek success in the corporate and financial arenas.[1] [open endnotes in new window]

Tony Stark, alter ego of superhero Iron Man, is strongly reminiscent of real-life computer geek Steve Jobs. Like Indiana Jones, Stark is a kind of super-geek, suave, dashing ...

... and brainy all at the same time. *Iron Man 2* clearly references Steve Jobs and Bill Gates in the competition between Tony Stark and Justin Hammer.

As geeks are recognized as sources of cultural and economic capital, their manliness and date-worthiness must also rise. This provokes a desire to see geeks in a new way. Contemporary media fulfill this desire with portrayals of sympathetic geek protagonists.

As geekdom moves from the cultural fringes into the mainstream, it becomes increasingly difficult for the figure of the geek to maintain the outsider victim status that made him such a sympathetic figure in the first place. Confronted with his cultural centrality and white, masculine privilege—geeks are most frequently represented as white males—the geek seeks a simulated victimhood and even simulated ethnicity in order to justify his existence as a protagonist in a world where an unmarked straight white male protagonist is increasingly passé.

Female geek/slacker duos like Enid and Rebecca from *Ghost World* merit further research.

Our investigation proceeds through three core concepts / tropes prevalent in geek-centered visual narratives:

1. "geek melodrama" as a means of rendering geek protagonists sympathetically,
2. white male "geek rage" against women and ethnic minorities for receiving preferential treatment from society, which relates to the geek's often raced, usually misogynistic implications for contemporary constructions of masculinity, and
3. "simulated ethnicity," our term for how geeks read their sub-cultural identity as a sign of markedness or as a put-upon status equivalent to the markedness of a marginalized identity such as that of a person of color.

We analyze these tropes via an historical survey of some key moments in the rise of geek media dominance: the early-20th century origins of geekdom and its rise as an identifiable subculture in the 1960s, the mainstreaming of geek masculinity in the 1970s and 80s via blockbuster cinema and superhero comics, and the postmodern permutations of geekdom popularized by Generation X cultural producers, including geek/slacker duos in "indie" cinema and alternative comics.

Tina Fey as Liz Lemon foregrounds her geek credibility on *30 Rock*.

We would like to note that while there are many important examples of female geeks, including geeky high-schooler Dawn Weiner (Heather Matarazzo) in Todd Solondz's *Welcome to the Dollhouse* (1995), protagonist Enid Coleslaw in the comic and film versions of *Ghost World* (1993-1997 and 2001) and, more recently, Tina Fey's Liz Lemon on the NBC comedy *30 Rock* (2006-present), the critical thrust of our intervention examines previously unstudied issues of masculinity and misogyny as they relate to male geeks, while acknowledging that female geekdom deserves further extensive research.

Origins of the nerd and the geek

To trace the history of geek culture, we must begin with the cultural (stereo-)type of the nerd, whose history is traced in Benjamin Nugent's *American Nerd*. "Nerd" designates a type, fully solidified in the American cultural imagination by the 1960s, that stands in stark negative contrast to the upper-class sportsman or "jock" (Nugent 37, 57). The nerd is a social outsider who is intelligent, technologically proficient and, until the 1970s, viewed as an object of pity and / or ridicule by mainstream

Woody Allen is a popular geek protagonist in the tradition of the Jewish nebbish.

culture. According to Nugent, the "nerd" type predates the term, which came into parlance around 1950 as successor to the "greasy grind"—both terms refer to the college student, stereotypically of Eastern European or Jewish descent, who works hard academically (at a suggested inhuman intensity) to gain entry into elite, formerly blue-blooded institutions like the Ivy League. Calling such a student a "greasy grind" is a way of devaluing that hard working student's efforts by labeling the student as one dimensional and not well-rounded, especially socially and athletically, and therefore less deserving of entry into the American elite despite his/her academic or intellectual achievements. Early media nerds include Harold Lloyd in *The Freshman* (1925), Jerry Lewis' titular character in *The Nutty Professor* (1963), underground cartoonist R. Crumb, and the screen persona of Woody Allen.

In the comedies of Lloyd and Lewis, humor arises from the nerdy social misfit trying to fit into mainstream—that is, "jock"—culture. Yet the proto-geek himself is presented sympathetically, he is our misfit hero.

Harold Lloyd built his comic persona around nerdiness yet Lloyd's characters often looked up to jocks, and his competition with them...

... arose out of an earnest desire to fit into mainstream culture. He is a prototype of the geeky hero who "gets the girl" by the last reel.

In contrast, the dramatic film narratives of Hollywood's Golden Age depict geekdom as horrific, abject, deserving of pity rather than sympathy. In the influential 1947 film noir *Nightmare Alley,* which centers upon the rise and fall of a carnival sideshow mentalist named Stan Carlyle (Tyrone Power), the carnival's geek is barely human, a pathetic, insane alcoholic whose very presence threatens the reputation of the carnival. Indeed, one character notes early in the film that "some [performers] won't work in carnivals that have [geeks]," and by the end of the film, Stan's depravity is marked by his acceptance of the job of carnival geek.

Of course, the geek of *Nightmare Alley* is a bona fide sideshow horror, not the much milder technology and comics enthusiast the term connotes today. Yet something of the sense of social marginality remains in the present-day term, and it is this abjection upon which the contemporary geek hangs his melodramatic victim narrative.

The way we understand the term geek since the 1960s is closely related to the history of the nerd, but it inflects itself differently. The geek is more focused, more fanatical than a nerd. The geek is a specialist and is always passionate about his chosen field(s) of knowledge. Whereas a nerd's successes are almost always scholastic, and frequently center on scientific and/or mathematical expertise (e.g., Brian [Anthony Michael Hall] in *The Breakfast Club*), a geek can fail at school because he is too immersed in his sub-cultural interests (e.g., Rob Fleming in *High Fidelity*). A third type, the dork, tends toward more impractical interests than the geek and is even more lacking in social cachet (e.g., Napoleon Dynamite's experiment with an action figure on his school bus and his love of tetherball).

Of these three related terms—geek, nerd, and dork—*geek* is the oldest, originating as a northern English variant of an older word, *geck*, which began in the Middle Dutch, as *gec*, a fool, simpleton, or dupe, dating back in English to Alexander Barclay's *Certayne Eglogues* of 1515:

> "Aiijb, He is a foole, a sotte, and a geke also Which choseth...the worst [way] and most of ieoperdie" (*OED*).

It was also used by Shakespeare in *Twelfth Night*:

> "Why have you suffer'd me to be imprison'd. / And made the most notorious gecke and gull / That ere invention plaid on?" (5.1)

The term reemerged in the early 20th century to describe the sub-human sideshow eater of live animals and the subaltern-like identity of that performer provides a context for the geek as marginalized. But, beyond that etymological history, it is more relevant to identify that "geek" was appropriated as an epithet for non-carnival social outsiders.

Nerd first saw print on October 8, 1951 in *Newsweek*: "In Detroit, someone who once would be called a drip or a square is now, regrettably, a nerd." The origin of nerd is unclear, but likely comes from Edgar Bergen's buck-toothed dummy Mortimer Snerd or from its use without definitional context in Dr. Seuss's book *If I Ran the Zoo* (1950): "I'll sail to Ka-Troo And Bring Back an It-Kutch, a Preep and a Proo, a Nerkle, a Nerd, and a Seersucker, too" (Lighter [v. 2] 367)!

Dork originally meant penis. It was first used in Jere Peacock's 1961 novel *Valhalla*:

> "You satisfy many women with that dorque?" (Lighter [v. 1] 638).

Dork began to mean a socially inept person in 1967, first being used this way in Don Moser and Jerry Cohen's *The Pied Piper of Tucson*:

"I didn't have any clothes and I had short hair and looked like a dork. Girls wouldn't go out with me" (32).

Table 1: Nerd, geek and dork characteristics

Type	Characteristics
Nerds	conformist, academic achievers
Geeks	passionate, keep it real through resistance to academic / professional capital (subcultural fan capital ok)
Dorks	socially awkward, inwardly focused, in some ways the most authentic in that his pursuits rarely lead to self-benefit in the eyes of society

Table 2: Interrelated features of geeks, nerds, and dorks
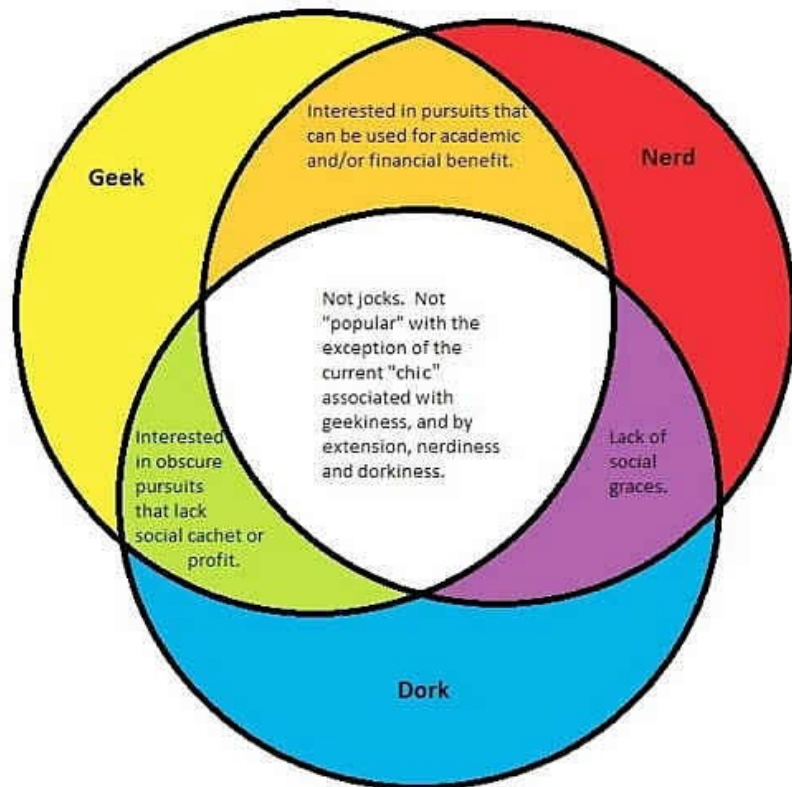
Of these three types, geeks are our main focus since their passion for certain hobbies and forms of expression often lead them into creative pursuits such as writing, comic book drawing, television production, and/or filmmaking. Furthermore, our geek-centric analysis allows us to shed light on the geek's interactions with a fourth character type, the slacker. We discuss the slacker type and its importance to geek culture in our analysis of the 1990s, the moment of the slacker's historical emergence.

Geek melodrama: gender, class, and race

Film scholar Linda Williams' explanation of the melodramatic mode is crucial to analyzing the cultural logic of geek entitlement and the emotional impact of geek narratives as they developed from the 1960s onward. As Williams argues in "Melodrama Revised," melodrama is best understood as a mode or loose collection of tropes rather than a specific literary or filmic genre, though it has strong historical ties to sentimental fiction like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and women's films (or "weepies")

R. Crumb's Whiteman is tortured by his identity, while an African American caricature enjoys the carefree bliss of an implied ignorance. "Whiteman" *Zap Comix #1*, 1968.

In *Office Space*, Lundberg's unapologetic participation in the corporate environment sets him as a villain, and Gibbon's tortured relationship to his work makes him sympathetic, despite both characters' participation in the same economic system and set of privileges.

Gibbons' and the film's racialized fantasy of violent, melodramatically justified geek vengeance.

like *Stella Dallas* (1925, 1937) and *Terms of Endearment* (1983). As Williams explains, "the mode of melodrama … [moves] us to pathos for protagonists beset by forces more powerful than they and who are perceived as victims" (42). This set of structures—heightened pathos, clear oppositions between good and evil by which we are made to identify and empathize with a suffering victim, and thus to yearn for narrative closure via the defeat of the victim's oppressor(s)—is common to all genres of U.S. film and, as Williams argues, to U.S. popular narratives writ large. As she states,

> "melodrama has always mattered and continues to matter in American culture … the sexual, racial, and gender problems of American history have found their most powerful expression in melodrama" (82).

Williams' model helps us see how racial marking becomes desirable to white geeks: if suffering equals virtue and moral superiority, then the virtue of a marked identity type (black, female, gay, disabled) can be reduced to how much one suffers for it. Here is also the key to why our analysis reads geeks primarily as straight white men. The anxieties of the straight white male geek's identity are transformed into the authenticating devices that paradoxically make him a moral hero in a postmodern world in which an unmarked and untroubled straight white male hero would normally be out of place.

Melodramatic tropes are deployed to create sympathy for white male geeks beset by their own sexual, racial, and gender problems. For example, R. Crumb characters Whiteman and Fritz the Cat are driven to angst by the carefree lives of African Americans they encounter as well as the ease with women this blitheness imbues them with. Similarly, Peter Gibbons (Ron Livingston), protagonist of Mike Judge's *Office Space* (1999), hates his unapologetically mainstream boss Lundberg (Gary Cole), both for work-related humiliations and because Gibbons wrongly imagines that his new girlfriend has had sex with Lundberg. Gibbons expresses his rage at Lundberg's perceived victimization of him by destroying an office copy machine in a slow-motion sequence set to gangsta rap music: it is Gibbons' and the film's racialized fantasy of violent, melodramatically justified geek vengeance.

In line with their presumed whiteness, geeks are typically economically privileged. Both Gibbons and Lundberg are economically empowered white-collar workers. It is Lundberg's unapologetic participation in the corporate environment that sets him as a villain, and Gibbon's tortured relationship to his work which make him sympathetic, despite both characters participation in the same economic system and set of privileges.

In terms of the geek's class identity, it is important to our project to discuss Zygmunt Bauman's essay "Tourist and Vagabonds," and to use Williams' insights about identity-based suffering to shed light on Bauman's claims, as well as to introduce the term "simulated ethnicity." Bauman deftly analyzes globalization and why "vagabonds," the global have-nots, are in a state of perpetual admiration of the economic mobility of the tourists, the privileged members of "developed" nations. As a Marxist, Bauman is clearly focused on the economic disparity between the tourist and vagabond. However, if we use the logic of melodrama to modify Bauman's analysis, the vagabond has a surplus of one commodity that the tourist desires: the tourist admires the vagabond's suffering, which imbues the vagabond with virtue. This plays out, for example, as real-life tourists paradoxically disdain the touristy and prefer to travel with the conceit that they are more "on the inside" than an average tourist. This ironic admiration of "vagabond-ness" is the same as the admiration non-marked identities have for marked identities in a postmodern milieu, where markedness serves as an authenticating feature. We use the term "simulated ethnicity" to describe the way geeks melodramatically cast themselves as members of a marginalized identity to foreground their validity and authenticity as
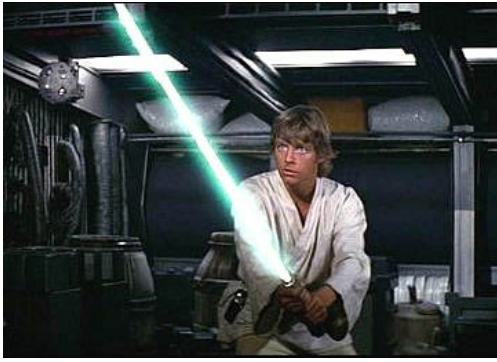
Luke Skywalker, the most popular and influential melodramatic geek protagonist of the late 1970s and 1980s. Perhaps more than any other single figure, Skywalker helped mainstream the geek.

postmodern protagonists.

Geeks mainly generate their markedness from non-ethnic features, and whiteness is the stereotypically assumed race of geekdom. According to cultural theorist Richard Dyer, whiteness connotes spirituality, intellect, *enterprise* (*White* 14-15, 21, 23). Geeks are by definition enterprising—this is precisely what marks them as uncool from the jock or slacker point of view—and indeed, even the name *Enterprise* has been associated with space travel and sci-fi geekdom since the 1960s. Strong spiritual elements saturate geek texts, in the form of

- kung fu (which inspired Mark Salzman from *Protagonist* and Quentin Tarantino for *Kill Bill*),
- karate (*The Karate Kid*),
- encounters with extraterrestrials (Roy Neary in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind,* Elliott in *E.T.*) or simply
- "The Force" (Luke Skywalker from *Star Wars*).

The geek imagines himself a "peaceful warrior" with immense power *and* a finesse, sensitivity, and interior world that his brutish "jock" competitors lack. This sensitivity, spirituality, and intelligence comes in exchange for sexual prowess, which is the one thing more athletic and conventionally attractive men have that the geek typically doesn't. No matter his intellectual gifts or proclivities toward accomplishment, the geek is always by definition sexually inferior to the jock, and feels that inferiority deeply.

Sexuality is itself racialized, and so we can place the white male geek on a racial and gendered continuum that situates him between, on the one hand, male jocks and black males, who are stereotypically considered more embodied, sexual, and animalistic, and, on the other, Asian male geeks, who are stereotypically considered even more rational and less sexual than white male geeks. Note that these raced positionings along the masculinity / femininity continuum largely result from the projection of white male fantasies, not necessarily anything in "real life"—they are white middle-class cultural stereotypes. Also note that we must specify males here because the raced and sexualized stereotyping process operates differently for non-white females than it does for their male counterparts. For example, stereotypically Asian females are hyper-sexualized while Asian males are hypo-sexualized.

Table 3: Geek race and gender

(see also Nugent 73)

Gendered status	Figure
hyper-masculine, hyper sexualized	black man
normatively masculine	white male jock*
somewhat masculine	white male slacker
feminized	white/Jewish male geek
hyper-feminized, hypo-sexualized, androgynous	Asian male geek (formerly the Jewish geek)

*Note that "jock" is not synonymous with "athlete" – athletes are in fact geeks of sports.

The young white male's desire to inhabit racialized identities, especially blackness, is displayed in a wide array of geek media: to take just one example, in *Swingers* (1996), an *ur*-text of 1990s geekdom depicting geeky white guys trying to play hip in order to attract women, the hippest guy whom everyone else looks up to is Charles, the black guy.

Swingers: Mike and Trent, a white geek/slacker buddy pair are part of a...

... group of white friends who all want to hang out with Charles, a cool black guy.

In *Dogma*, Jay and Silent Bob's anxiety about their own queer arrested development is alleviated by joining a black gang.

The function of this imagined black masculinity for the feminized geek is rendered in direct, highly sexually charged terms in Kevin Smith's *Dogma* (1999). Having just been "outed" as a homosexual fantasizer by a black man (Chris Rock), geeky stoner Jay (Jason Mewes) flees to a heterosexual strip club, where he enters into a bidding war with a black gang leader, Kane (Dwight Ewell) for the attentions of a stripper. At the conclusion of this episode, Kane asks Jay and his "heterosexual life mate," Silent Bob (Smith), to join his gang. Jay and Silent Bob's anxiety over their own sexual impotency and possible queerness is here channeled into projected black gang solidarity: they join the gang to reinforce their masculinity and heterosexuality in the face of their own geeky arrested development.

The Social Network (2010) is a highly profitable, culturally significant, Oscar-nominated entry into the annals of recent geek-centered film narratives. Directed by David Fincher, the film melodramatizes the creation of social networking site Facebook by computer geek Mark Zuckerberg (Jesse Eisenberg) starting at Harvard in the early 2000s. The story is set up around two court cases brought against Zuckerberg by his former business partners, Eduardo Saverin (Andrew Garfield) and the Winklevoss twins (Armie Hammer and Josh Pence). The Winklevoss twins in particular are shown in the film to be uber-jocks, members of Harvard Crew and perfect specimens of muscular, attractive Aryan blondeness. Despite the real-life Winklevoss' status as respected Olympic athletes, the onscreen Zuckerberg shows utter contempt for them throughout the entire film; they are the "jerks" of the film's story.

In *The Social Network*, while geeky Jewish computer programmer Mark Zuckerberg loses an irrelevant (to him) sum of money to the jockish Winklevoss twins, he effectively vanquishes them from any further effect on Facebook or his life ...

The Social Network amplifies the geek melodrama of Zuckerberg's story by framing his creation of Facebook as an attempt to impress his ex-girlfriend Erica Albright (Rooney Mara). The opening sequence of the film depicts Erica breaking up with Mark after he insults her upbringing and her education, essentially accusing her of being over-privileged and unintelligent. He spends the rest of the film regretting his loss of her and channeling his anger at her rejection of him into his Facebook business. This explanation of the motivation behind the onscreen Zuckerberg's efforts is fictional. Not only is it impossible to verify whether or not the real-life Zuckerberg even had a substantive relationship with the woman the Albright character represents in the film, but he had already met Priscilla Chan—who became his girlfriend in 2003 and his wife in May 2012—by the time the events dramatized in the movie transpired. In other words, contrary to the film's narrative, he was engaged in a successful romantic relationship more or less the whole time he was working on turning Facebook into an international phenomenon. Fincher's choice to frame the narrative in this way, ignoring the existence of the Facebook creator's real-life girlfriend and future wife, heightens the film's geek melodrama by staging the entire narrative as a socially outcast computer geek's obsessive competition with jocks over women.

... but still loses his girlfriend to this unnamed black guy (symbolically if not literally). No matter his intellectual gifts or proclivities toward accomplishment, the geek is always by definition sexually inferior to the jock, and feels that inferiority deeply.

Of interest here is not so much *The Social Network*'s fidelity or infidelity to real life events, but rather why this heavy emphasis is placed upon male competition for women in a film containing no significant romantic plot (or even subplot). The answer: to highlight the foundational battle between geeks and jocks for dominance in the heterosexual dating field. In the *Social Network* that core struggle of geek versus jock is used as a framing device, a backdrop to the battle taking place in the worlds of internet technology and business, but the film makes clear that for the fictional Zuckerberg, being humiliated by jocks and women is what fuels his desire to see Facebook succeed. Indeed, *Chicago Sun-Times* critic Jim Emerson notes of the onscreen Zuckerberg that "all of Mark's motivations appear to be old-fashioned, personal, emotional ones," and this bespeaks the mode of melodrama.

Even more interesting in this connection is the scene in which Zuckerberg confronts Albright in a restaurant about halfway through the film. She sits next to an unnamed African American guy, who asks her if "there is a problem here" as her tableside debate with Zuckerberg intensifies. She deals with Zuckerberg herself, explicitly referring to geek rage in her repudiation of him: "You write your snide bullshit from a dark room because that's what the angry do nowadays." Yet it is significant that this unnamed black companion is given screen time; the scene shows how the geek's self-righteous anger is directed at women and at jockish

Superbad, in which Miroki, an Asian male, serves as a temporary example of a more staid

and less rambunctious colleague for Evan, Michael Cera's geek protagonist.
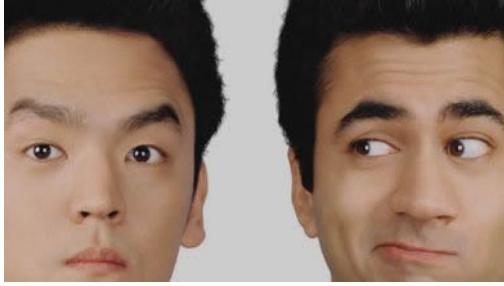
Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle plays its Asians as central protagonists; in doing so, the film tries to grapple with some of the stereotypes ascribed to Asian male geeks while at times reifying them.

Seth Rogen as romantically viable Jewish geek, here posing as Cary Grant in a 2008 *Vanity Fair* photo shoot.

men, perhaps especially men who are ethnically marked and therefore harder to denounce on the grounds of untrammeled race-based cultural privilege.

If the white geek is often bested by jocks and black hipsters, a compensatory part of the white geek's melodrama is to disparage Asian geeks as being even less hip, less authentic than he is. Even for a geek, a lack of "well roundedness" is a concept that can be used to marginalize Asian geeks. In this way of thinking, the Asian geek doesn't "keep it real" because he is too mercenary: he is only interested in the types of geekiness which will benefit him academically or get him ahead. Hence the Asian Geek or any mercenary geek lacks the spirit or heart needed to redeem him melodramatically by the narrative's end. *Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle* (2004) is a film well aware of these stereotypes, unlike less multi-ethnic films such as *Superbad*, wherein an Asian male simply serves as a temporary example of a more staid and less rambunctious colleague for Michael Cera's geek protagonist. *HKGWC* instead plays its Asians as central protagonists; in doing so, the film tries to grapple with some of the stereotypes ascribed to Asian male geeks while at times reifying them, showing John's Cho's character (who has obviously picked a profession based on its lucrativeness) initially supplicating himself to do accounting work for his cooler office mates as well as unable to talk to his love interest. Kumar Patel's slackerism can be read as a conscious revolt against stereotypes about Asians who dispassionately pursue careers in medicine in compliance with parental desires.

In fact, both Jews and Asians are traditionally stereotyped as academically focused "keeners" (a term of Canadian origin, which refers to a type of nerd who only cares about his grades). Only recently, with the films of Team Apatow, are Jews becoming more synonymous with "hip" (sexual) geeks.[2] [open endnotes in new window] In *Knocked Up,* Ben Stone, played by Seth Rogen, foregrounds his Jewishness while embodying geek (and previously nebbish) qualities such as self-doubt and a living arrangement surrounded by immature young men interested in internet technology and other geeky pursuits. However, these qualities are also marshaled as authenticating features that make him sympathetic and imbue his character with a non-threatening, yet rakish masculinity in a postmodern milieu. This overlap is why the rise of the Jewish male protagonist is inseparably intertwined with the conceits of geek melodrama. In *Superbad* it is the put-upon, picked-on, identity of the Jewish keener that allows Michael Cera's character Evan, who is harassed by bullies early in the film, to possess the virtues of suffering imbued by the melodramatic mode and thus become a morally superior protagonist who has the right to humiliate jocks and non-geeks, and ultimately get the girl.[3]

Jewishness allows ethnic specificity yet middle class white appeal/identification, for, as Richard Dyer observes, whiteness "creates a category of maybe, sometimes whites" who "may be let in to whiteness under particular historical circumstances" (*White* 19). Even within one historical moment, Jewish geeks may fluctuate somewhat in how they relate to whiteness, sometimes appearing as "transparently" white, at other times singled out as a socially oppressed, "raced" minority. For example, in *Superbad,* the characters played by Michael Cera and Jonah Hill make no mention of their ethnicity and therefore can be read as transparently white, but in promoting the film, Cera, Hill, and Seth Rogen often referred to their collective "Jew fros," through their very language juxtaposing their less marked ethnicity with that of African Americans. This racializing of Jews through comparison / proximity to black characters is evinced even more pointedly in the *Freaks and Geeks* episode "Beers and Weirs" when Jewish kid Neal (Samm Levine) commiserates with an unnamed black friend:

> Black Kid: "No, no, no—you wouldn't want to trade places with me, believe me!"

> Neal: "I don't know, I mean, I'm Jewish. That's no cakewalk either. I was elected school treasurer last year. . . I didn't even run."

Geeky Jew Neal Schweiber commiserates with an unnamed black kid about ethnic oppression in episode two of *Freaks and Geeks*.

Like R. Crumb's Whiteman, Jon Lajoie uses the stand-in character "Everyday Normal Guy" in *You Want Some of This*, 2007.

Sarah Silverman as an altered version of herself in "Jews with German Cars," *Jesus is Magic*, 2005.

In this context it is no surprise that Jewish geeks are so prevalent in geek culture, for they are possessed of a real ethnicity that nevertheless functions analogously enough to a "simulated" ethnicity—that is, it is hard to see visually (like whiteness) but is historically justified by (generations of) persecution and suffering—as to allow Jewish geek protagonists to operate as proxies for simulated ethnics who consume these texts. While the persecution of Jewish people and the Holocaust are certainly valid grounds for feelings of victimization, within the popular milieu Jewishness is similarly an authenticating device in the face of a postmodern crisis of authenticity which can set a protagonist apart from the square and unmarked (non-Jewish) white colonizer.

1960s: underground boomer geekdom

We begin our historical survey of media geekdom with one of the earliest and most influential of Boomer geeks, underground comics creator R. Crumb.[4] We use Crumb as our starting point and early definitive geek because through his work, Crumb confesses to what all geeks conceal.

The first issue of *Zap Comix* by R. Crumb came out in 1968. This was the debut of R. Crumb's famous "keep on truckin'" motif and, more importantly for this project, the character "Whiteman." As the first place where the spelling "comix" was used prominently, *Zap* was extremely influential: prominent cartoonists such as *Maus* author Art Spiegelman would later adopt the term comix to emphasize the multimedia nature of the medium. *Zap* was a collection of mostly one to three page comic shorts wherein Crumb engaged themes of 1960s counterculture like free love and dropping out, while overlapping them with his own anxieties about sex, sexual fixation, and identity. Crumb's work has often been analyzed for its extreme confessionality and scathingly harsh depictions of self. However, using Linda Williams' insights into the melodramatic mode as a lens with which to interrogate Crumb's work reveals previously unexamined explorations of melodramatic victimhood. While also a harsh critic of this phenomenon through the polyvalent and iconic medium of comics, intriguingly, Crumb is simultaneously a progenitor of geek melodrama and the authenticating devices of the geek hero.

A *straightforward* reading of R. Crumb's "Whiteman" (*R. Crumb Handbook* 120) is that it depicts the stress of being white and middle class (Crumb and Whiteman's projection) in juxtaposition to a carefree lower-class African American existence. The character Whiteman finds himself off the beaten path in his city surrounded by African Americans (drawn in a consciously stereotypical Sambo-styled comics shorthand by Crumb). Whiteman grapples with his fear of the African Americans and his guilt because of his fear; meanwhile, the African Americans tell him to "Be cool!" and to listen to the laughing and the singing coming from down the street (in an intentionally problematic Stephen Foster-like depiction of the African-Americans as either simple children or happy-go-lucky charlatans).

"Whiteman" is significant in that Crumb positions a less marked white identity in juxtaposition with more marked non-white ethnicities and the angst that accompanies it. Crumb draws attention to the irony of this move by naming the character Whiteman. In terms of his name, Whiteman is quite marked, but in terms of his appearance, Whiteman is less marked because he lacks ethnic iconicity in the shorthand comics depiction of him. Crumb is highly aware of this contrast when he decides to hyper-exaggerate the stereotypically racist depictions of African Americans in early American comics. When subsequent artists and performers (such as the "Everyday Normal Guy" played by Jon Lajoie on YouTube and Sarah Silverman in her "Jews in German Cars" video) engage with this subject, they also create characters which are an exaggeration of, but not identical with, the creator's standard public/comedic persona.

"Whiteman" depicts the stress of being white and middle class (Crumb and Whiteman's projection) in juxtaposition to a carefree lower-class African American existence. *Zap* #1, 1968.

Jimi Hendrix enjoys ease with women because he lacks the tortured thoughtfulness of R. Crumb. *R. Crumb Draws the Blues*, 1993.

The African American crows also enjoy a social cachet with women that Fritz is jealous of in *Fritz the Cat*, "Fritz the Cat," R. Crumb, originally published 1968.

What is advanced here (and also in the tales of Skutch, Crumb's later autobiographical work grappling with a popular and more typically masculine high school counterpart), regardless of Crumb's ironic authorial intention, is Crumb's self-identification with and interrogation of a put-upon yet unstudied identity, whiteness. This whiteness, because of so much attention paid to marked identities like ethnicity and gender, acquires a level of significance and interest that ultimately trumps, in the mind of the geek, traditionally marginalized identities based on gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality. It is through suffering in the melodramatic mode and hence victimhood that Crumb's protagonists gain authenticity as well as imbue their identity with a political cache that allows them to be sympathetic characters while simultaneously benefitting from a system that Crumb castigates. Even as Crumb intends ironic psychodrama, a through-line of non-ironic melodrama survives.

Still, it is important to address Crumb's work as both ironic and confessional. Crumb's depictions of women and of African Americans are shockingly racist, misogynistic, and objectifying. However, a valid reading of Crumb's work integrates Crumb's satirization of the racist imagery that haunts U.S. identity and the misogyny inherent in U.S. dominant ideology. With such a reading, our study of Crumb can come under fire for taking Crumb and his artistic conceits to task while misreading his own critical perspective on the very issues we accuse him of reifying. This is why it is important to acknowledge Crumb's work as both ironic and confessional.

The misogyny and racism on the page is also Crumb's depiction of the racism and misogyny he has internalized from our culture. Crumb confesses this inner programming to draw a reader's attention to his or her own haunted impulses surrounding race and gender. However, as Crumb's body of work bears out, he does not evoke these demons to exorcise them, but to repeatedly shed light on them. So, it is valid and useful to study Crumb's work as a reification of cultural paradigms, especially in a study of cultural trends such as this one, despite Crumb's possibly ironic and self-critical positioning surrounding these paradigms. [5] By shedding light on his geek rage, Crumb does not exorcise it either, but provides it for readers to identify with it.

The relationship between Crumb and Skutch is tellingly analogous to the relationship between Whiteman and the African Americans he encounters in *Zap* #1. These African American men, as depicted by Crumb, are unselfconscious and thus are granted a carefreeness and coolness that is similar to that of Skutch as a popular high school student. This sheds light on the relation between geeks and ethnicity, and geeks and popularity. In both cases, the geek focuses on how his tortured identity, rooted in his thoughtfulness and lack of façade, is not recognized, while thoughtless jocks and African Americans, who are already regarded as cooler, get to live carefree and un-tortured lives precisely because of their perceived "inferiorities" to geeks. Again, it comes back to the melodramatized geek notion of a tragic female misrecognition of true worth – the female inability to see value in the geek and the failure to see through the jock or the African American. In terms of African Americans and Crumb, this is a continuing trope, including depictions of Jimi Hendrix and white groupies, to the African American crows in *Fritz the Cat* (1993) who accumulate white women while being more interested in getting high, while Fritz struggles with coming off as cool while the crows do so with no effort.

See also Crumb's portrayal of the working class and non-intellectual (and therefore non-tortured) Bo Bo Bolinski in "*Bo Bo* Bolinski Relaxing On a Saturday Afternoon" from *Id* #3 (1991), who has easy access to his thick-legged (and therefore ideal by Crumb's measure) wife and who doesn't even appreciate her as he drinks a beer and watches Sunday football while nonchalantly copulating with her from behind.

More interestingly, in *My Troubles with Women*, Crumb portrays the androcentric

Bo Bo Bolinski has easy access to his thick-legged (and therefore ideal by Crumb's measure) wife and who doesn't even appreciate her as he drinks a beer and watches Sunday football while nonchalantly copulating with her from behind. *Id* #3, originally published 1985.

consequences of geek rage. Of particular importance is the relationship between Crumb and his older brother Charles with the aforementioned popular boy Skutch. This begins in the section entitled "My Troubles with Women Part II," which first appeared in *Hup* in 1986. The first panel opens with a woman, captioned "a woman," saying, "Doesn't this guy ever stop whining?"

The panel two caption, as if in response, explains,

> "Part One was just the tip of the iceberg … This time we're *really* gonna get down in the murk!"

In panel two, Crumb, wearing a Hugh Hefner-esque smoking jacket and smoking a pipe, signifying a mock playboyish mastery of romantic interaction, expounds,

> "My first hard lesson about women came soon after puberty … There was this guy in our high-school named 'Skutch' …" Sitting next to Crumb is a character Crumb would in later work refer to as "Li'l Hitler Pig."[6]

Li'l Hitler Pig, henceforth LHP, embodies all the world-weary, cynical, and conniving ways to look at the world that dominant males (not Crumb) use to make meaning of their lives and "get" women (like Vince Vaughn's "swinger" Trent of the 1990s). LHP provides knowing commentary on the events in Crumb's life and even on his sexual fantasies.

Crumb and Li'l Hitler Pig from *My Troubles with Women*. LHP provides Crumb with the coaching that men have to be jerks to acquire female attention. "My Troubles with Women Part II," R. Crumb, originally published 1986.

Li'l Hitler Pig from *My Troubles with Women*, "If I Were a King," R. Crumb, originally published 1987.
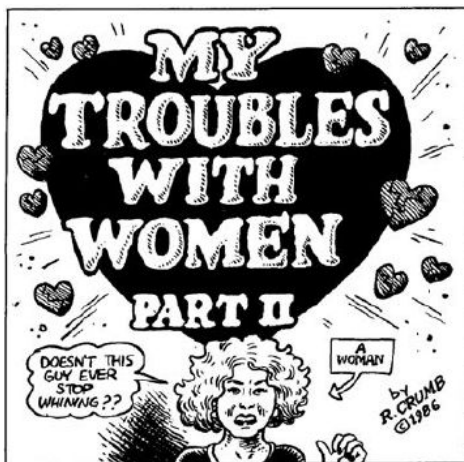
Crumb adopts an ironic distancing in yet still reifies key misogynistic geek paradigms. "My Troubles with Women Part II," in *My Troubles with Women*, originally published 1986.

In the geek-as-outsider formula, the jock Skutch is the most despicable character to appear in Crumb's *oeuvre*. *My Troubles with Women*, "My Troubles with Women Part II," R. Crumb, originally published 1986.

Skutch, who is one with his sexually aggressive, seductive, callous side (his LHP), is a key player in "My Troubles with Women part II." In the third panel of II, he is described as

> ". . . the number one *big man!* The most handsome, most charming, most self-confident male in the entire school."

In the geek-as-outsider formula, Skutch is also the most despicable character to appear in Crumb's *oeuvre*, exponentially more despicable than Crumb himself, who is confessional, but more importantly, melodramatically "tortured" about his own problematic relations with women. What makes Skutch so despicable is his apparent agency in these relations, though once Crumb achieves recognition through his real-life fame as a comics artist and cultural icon, he becomes an attractive geek and gains just as much agency (though of a different kind) as Skutch ever had.

However, Crumb remains firmly in the camp of the outsider (and therefore ultimately forgivable), while the females who seek him out are aligned with the "insider" world Skutch embodies. Crumb maintains his outsider status by never engaging the carefree attitude toward life that Skutch had. Instead, it is the women whom Crumb sleeps with who are thoughtless and un-tortured. This alignment is apparent in Crumb's misogynistic portrayal of these women as concerned only with the facades of cultural sophistication but not with the substance of it. Thus, their fascination with Crumb is still based in misrecognition: they do not appreciate who he is, but they appreciate his status. This is similar to the behavior of the high school girls who misrecognized Skutch and saw him as attractive. Crumb is an outsider to mainstream culture, and he is simultaneously a hero *and* outsider to the 1960s youth counterculture. Crumb is aligned with and wanted by hippies, and he created album covers for The Grateful Dead and Big Brother and the Holding Company.

Yet, Crumb did not truly fit in with them nor did he see their affection for him as a genuine assessment of his abilities or worthwhile qualities. In Terry Zwigoff's documentary *Crumb* (1994), Crumb said that he felt he was often mistaken for a narcotics agent and is still stung by Janis Joplin's question,

> "Crumb, what's the matter, don't you like girls?"

And while the tales of Skutch read much less transgressively than Crumb's more well known confessional depictions of male-female interactions, the misogyny of Crumb is arguably more significant in the tales of Skutch because it is by comparison an *unacknowledged* misogyny, one to which Crumb doesn't draw attention in the way he does in his other work.[7] The geek's misogynistic rage is this: Women are too shallow to recognize the good things about the sensitive, true, honest, and long-suffering, non-dominant males like Crumb and his brother Charles. Therefore, women deserve the pain and emotional torture they experience when they interact with males such as Skutch, but even more importantly, by this logic, they deserve the disdain and humiliation Crumb levies at them. When they do eventually see him and his comic geek proxies as worthy of attention (often, from Crumb's perspective, moved by shallow motives), Crumb's depiction of Skutch provides a bridge from the identity politics of "Whiteman" to the modern geek protagonist.

Through the melodramatic mode, Crumb allows that the geek, be it Whiteman or Crumb, has the moral high ground in the face of women, African Americans (in Whiteman, Fritz the Cat, Jimi Hendrix), low-class rednecks (BoBo Bolinski), and bullies (Skutch), because of the geek's tortured self-image and self–doubt. As Williams explains, in the melodramatic mode, suffering, regardless of its source, equals moral superiority. It is through this process that the geek hero becomes a justified and superior protagonist in the face of all other identities and regardless of the politics surrounding the geek hero's straight white maleness. The melodramatic mode allows the geek hero a niche in the politics of identity which lets him paradoxically identify as the victim of the socio-political system from which he benefits and, thus, be the ultimate protagonist with which audiences identify in a globalized, postmodern discourse.

This final image of Crumb is meant as ironic because of Crumb's complex awareness of his own vanity, greed, and guilt, but it also embodies actual conceits of contemporary mainstream culture as the popularity of the geek continues to increase. Geek rage arises from this melodramatic, self-pitying, and self-righteous understanding of geek identity. In Crumb, this plays out in his misogynistic depictions of the women who misunderstand him. These punished, objectified women in Crumb's work are typified by the Devil Girl (who has her head removed and her body used as a sex toy) and the Vulture Goddess (who has her head pushed in and her buttocks used as a trampoline) before finally accepting a geek as her appropriate paramour. Even as he arguably confesses and interrogates it, Crumb displays his outrage on two fronts: hatred for non-geek males and for women.

1970s-1980s: mainstreaming the geek

The "Hollywood Renaissance" period,[8] which spans roughly 1965-77, was a unique *auteur*-driven moment in Hollywood filmmaking, influenced by European art films, the French *nouvelle vague*, and the rise of the college art house theater circuit in the U.S. (see Biskind 14-17, 21-2, 33-5). The Hollywood Renaissance directors, all of whom (except the slightly older Robert Altman) were Baby Boomers, formed a boys' club of "Movie Brats" who were surrounded by but to varying degrees separate from the hippie counterculture.

In the late 1970s, George Lucas and Steven Spielberg, the two most culturally influential and economically successful Boomer geek filmmakers, helped reinstate the power of the studios over directors and inaugurated, with Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975) and Lucas's *Star Wars* (1977), the present-day era of the studio action blockbuster:

> "Indeed, whether working together or on their own projects ... the two virtually rewrote the box-office record books in the late 1970s and the 1980s. With the release of their third Indiana Jones collaboration in 1989, Lucas and Spielberg could claim eight of the ten biggest hits in movie history" (Schatz 31).

The new blockbuster cinema was founded on a synergistic model of entertainment production, marketing and promotion, wherein a film is not marketed in isolation but rather forms the core of a larger array of related products. In this model, a blockbuster film like *Star Wars* forms merely one strand of a larger revenue stream that includes ancillary products like action figures, comic books, cross-promotions with fast-food chains, etc. Demographically speaking, the films themselves, as well as many of their spinoff products, were (and are) targeted primarily at adolescent-to-teenaged males.

At the textual level, Spielberg's and Lucas' secret to success was that they brought low pop-cultural forms—monster movies, serialized science fiction—to larger budgets in Hollywood. Unlike the New Hollywood *auteurs,* Spielberg and Lucas revisited genre with little sense of irony nor much interest in social or political realities:

> "whereas the most sophisticated directors of the '70s, like Altman, Penn, Scorsese, and Hopper, were deconstructing genre, Lucas, like Spielberg, was doing the reverse, gentrifying discredited genres of the past" (Biskind 342).

We see the Lucas-Spielberg influence today in the cinematic adaptation of mainstream comic-book properties like *Batman, Iron Man*, and *The X-Men* as the latest sure-fire blockbuster properties.

> "[S]uch was Spielberg's (and Lucas's) influence, that every studio movie became a B movie" (278).

The geek's centrality to this blockbuster formula, starting in the late 1970s, is in fact the principal reason for his rise to mainstream cultural prominence in the 21st Century, the era of postmodern geekdom.

Spielberg and Lucas modeled their cinematic protagonists—Roy Neary (Richard Dreyfuss) in *Close Encounters*, Curt Henderson (also Dreyfuss) in *American Graffiti*, Luke Skywalker (Mark Hamill) in *Star Wars*—after themselves, framing
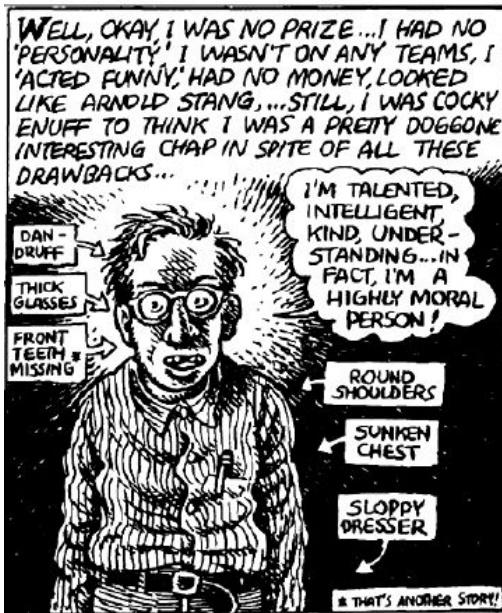
This final image of Crumb is meant as ironic because of Crumb's complex awareness of his own vanity, greed, and guilt, but it also embodies actual conceits of contemporary mainstream culture as the popularity of the geek continues to increase. *My Troubles with Women*, "My Troubles with Women Part II," R. Crumb, originally published 1986.

Steven Spielberg and George Lucas are arguably the most influential and successful of all geek media producers.

Ben Braddock was cast as a Jewish geek in *The Graduate*, even though the character implied by the novel is a jockish Southern Californian

them as geeky outsiders who suffer for their causes and have what it takes inside to ultimately prevail as heroes. Of course, Dustin Hoffman's portrayal of Ben Braddock in *The Graduate* (1967) is a key precursor to these late-70s examples(Biskind 34).[9] The character of Ben, scantly described in the Charles Webb novel, was assumed to be "the scion of an apparently WASPy family, a cocky, aloof college track star" (Harris 26). The role was originally intended for Robert Redford, but then director Mike Nichols switched gears and cast Jewish actor Dustin Hoffman as Ben (Harris 236, 275). However, the ironic tone and ambiguous ending of *The Graduate* prevents audiences from fully sympathizing with Hoffman's Ben or his quest to win the love of Elaine Robinson (Katherine Ross). It would take Lucas and Spielberg to sufficiently melodramatize the sufferings and heroism of the geek protagonist such that popular audiences would accept them in earnest.

In real life, Spielberg and Lucas are Boomer fanboys, nerds. They were of the first generation of American directors to go to film school and are known, along with Scorsese and DePalma, as the "movie brats," which could as easily read: "film geeks." Though Lucas and Spielberg rose to prevalence in the Hollywood Renaissance period when youth counterculture and director-based *auteur*ism were in, they were nevertheless outsiders to that prevailing (if momentary) *ethos*; Spielberg is a computer geek who prefers the editing room to the set and Lucas is well-known for having more business and technical acumen than people skills or ability to direct actors (*Steven Spielberg Interviews* 103). Spielberg and Lucas both love computers and Spielberg in particular is a self-proclaimed video game "freak" who grew up feeling like "a wimp in a world of jocks" (*Steven Spielberg Interviews* 100, 104, 108-9). His contemporaries in 1970s Hollywood described him as having "no sense of style, [he] was just desperate to be cool like everyone else, but he didn't know how" (Biskind 260). This is a description of a nerdy geek.

So when Spielberg got the chance to direct *Jaws* for Universal Studios, no wonder he cast the then little-known Richard Dreyfuss[10] as one of the three leads. The character Dreyfuss plays, marine biologist Matt Hooper, is described in Peter Benchley's novel as "handsome, tanned, hair bleached by the sun, ... about as tall as Brody, ... but leaner" who has an affair with police chief Brody's wife and ultimately gets killed by the shark (85). As with Mike Nichols' casting of Dustin Hoffman in *The Graduate*, Spielberg, by casting Dreyfuss, makes Hooper into a short Jewish nerd:

> "The book [*Jaws*] suggested somebody like Robert Redford to play Matt Hooper, but I felt there would be more sympathy for the character ... if someone like Richard Dreyfuss played him" (*Steven Spielberg Interviews* 63-4).

Spielberg's film also nixes the Hooper-Mrs. Brody affair, and (somewhat improbably) spares Hooper's life. Thus Spielberg's *Jaws* asks us to enjoy and identify with Hooper's snarky take on events in provincial Amity, all the while
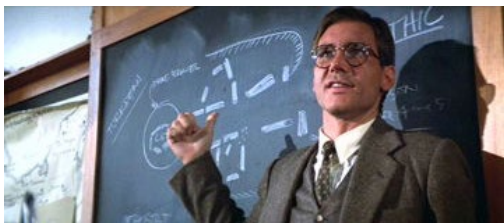
WASP.

Luke Skywalker as melodramatic geek figure: "Noooo!"

Steven Spielberg geekified the Matt Hooper character in *Jaws*, casting his onscreen alter ego Richard Dreyfuss in a role described in the novel as Robert Redford-like. Spielberg felt that casting Dreyfuss would make the character more sympathetic.

Indiana Jones is a geek superhero, Clark Kent and Superman all in one.

impressing us with his efficient analysis of the fictional island's shark problem. Our identification with Hooper is increased in the film version when he becomes crusty fisherman Quint's nemesis, another switch from the novel, where the cuckolded Chief Brody is kept as the trio's outsider.

Luke Skywalker is perhaps the most popular and influential melodramatic geek protagonist figure of the late 1970s and 1980s. Luke's development from the whiny, naive hayseed of *Star Wars* to the confident Jedi of *Return of the Jedi* constitutes one of the most influential geek narratives of the period. Luke is essentially a kung-fu geek who learns a quasi-Eastern spiritual fighting system from an old white mystic, then uses this as a means of escaping his socially backward existence on a remote desert planet. Luke's geeky naiveté and awkward earnestness are brought into particular relief once he meets Han Solo (Harrison Ford), the embodiment of the hip, jaded, rakish scoundrel. Particularly in contrast to Han, Luke exemplifies throughout the *Star Wars* trilogy the naive geek hero who suffers melodramatically, saves his evil father from ultimate perdition, and, along with his mostly male buddies (and a defanged, feminized Leia), takes over rightful leadership of the galaxy.

Boomers like Lucas and Spielberg obviously "get" idealistic geeks (c.f., Luke Skywalker, Roy Neary), but they tend to disregard, render comedic, and/or rehabilitate rakish scoundrels and especially disaffected Gen-X slackers. Boomer geek creators frequently depict slackerism or social nonconformity as lonely and empty, as in Han Solo's lack of idealism and "love of money" in *Star Wars,* which Luke and Leia both castigate him for. Slackerish rakes like Han Solo are usually reformed of their scoundrel tendencies in mainstream boomer geek films: as when Solo whooshes back in to save the day in *Star Wars*' climax, the scoundrel sidekick has change of heart and grows up, revealing that he ultimately embodies the same conformist values as his geekier friends.

While true "slackers" cannot be said to exist prior to the 1990s, the geek protagonists in 1970s and 80s popular media nevertheless attract rakish, scoundrelly, socially nonconformist sidekicks and buddies: Han for Luke, Quint for Hooper, Peter Venkman for Egon Spengler, John Belushi for Dan Aykroyd. Indiana Jones, or Christopher Reeve playing Superman and Clark Kent, are geek superheroes, and need no consistent buddies because they contain both aspects in one body. All of these popular narratives are male-centered, predominantly featuring male buddy duos (or male-centered groups) and evincing their fair share of misogyny. Princess Leia (Carrie Fisher, *Star Wars* trilogy, Ellen Brody (Lorraine Gary, *Jaws*), Ronnie Neary (Teri Garr, *Close Encounters*), and Marion Ravenwood (Karen Allen, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*) all see their roles lessened over the course of their narrative arcs, either reduced to ineffectual or secondary roles (Leia and Marion) or ejected from the narrative entirely (Ellen Brody and Ronnie)—evidence of geek misogyny at work.

In various ways, Lucas' and Spielberg's valorization of nerdy man-boy characters through the 1980s lay the groundwork for the rise of the specifically Generation X geek, who grew up watching—and often obsessing over—the films of Lucas, Spielberg, and also 80s teen-film director John Hughes. Hughes' work in particular melodramatizes the plight of the geek, showing him to be a sensitive, intelligent, and sympathetic character type. Teen-film scholar Timothy Shary writes of Hughes' seminal *Breakfast Club,*

> "Unlike most nerd characters in school films, [*The Breakfast Club*'s] Brian ultimately appears to accept his nerd labeling, and his peers eventually show some sincere appreciation for the difference he represents [. . .] Brian may be alone unlike the others, but he has thus ironically maintained a certain independence that is not afforded to them" (*Generation Multiplex* 35).

In sum, Boomer geeks like Hughes and Spielberg made the young nerds of Generation X the heroes of their 1980s films, and the Generation X nerds, then in

Like most geek-centered narratives, *Raiders of the Lost Ark* evinces geek misogyny by compromising its female lead, Marion Ravenwood. She starts the film as Indy's equal but is transformed into a dress-wearing damsel in distress by the second half.

their childhood or adolescence, watched and identified with these depictions.[11][12]

Go to page 3

To top   Print version   JC 54   *Jump Cut* home

Anthony Bourdain gains authenticity and credibility through his simulated vagabond-ness on The Travel Channel's *No Reservations*.

Christopher Nolan's "dark" interpretation of Batman and The Joker in 2008's *The Dark Knight* is influenced by the late-1980s Batman comics of Frank Miller and Alan Moore.

Generation X: tourists and vagabonds, geeks and slackers

The existence of a slacker, man-boy counterpart is key to our analysis of the rise of the geek protagonist, because it is in the geek's collaboration with his slacker accomplice, as well as his sharing of the slacker's tendencies towards unprofitable pursuits like comic book collecting and playing video games, that the geek protagonist creates a simulation of not being a part of "the system," i.e., the capitalizing and colonizing world of jocks and businessmen. This sleight of hand allows the geek protagonist to rise (in terms of economic and cultural power) in a more unblemished and sympathetic way. To interrogate this phenomenon, we present a unique reading of globalization theorist Zygmunt Bauman's essay on class stratification, "Tourists and Vagabonds." According to Bauman, under globalization class stratification is defined by mobility:

> "To increase their capacity for consumption, consumers must never be allowed to rest. They need to be kept forever awake and on the alert, constantly exposed to new temptations and so remain in a state of never wilting excitation – and also, indeed, a state of perpetual suspicion and steady disaffection" (Bauman 83).

Bauman defines two categories of world citizens, 'high up' tourists as members of the developed world who can afford increasing mobility, and 'low down' vagabonds, who have little in the way of resources, mobility, or hope (85-6).

Tourists, who are privileged to have more mobility (e.g., access to the Internet, jet airline travel, etc.) under time- and space-compressed globalization, are admired by the vagabond, who, conversely, is robbed of mobility by globalization. The vagabond admires the tourist's ease and ability to (by definition) choose where to locate himself or herself. However, the term "tourist" is a key to overlapping the rise of geek culture with Bauman's identity binary because in the postmodern and heavily mediated milieu of the geek, "tourist" can only have negative connotations (as privileged cultural interloper) and so ironically, it is the tourist/geek who wants to be perceived as the more authentic vagabond.[13] [open endnotes in new window] Thus, the geek foregrounds his/her put-upon status in order to artfully and self-deceivingly demonstrate how s/he is *not* empowered, and thus not part of the problematic and enfranchised identity of the tourist who oppresses the vagabond out of self-interest.

To the postmodern sensibilities of the geek, the gawky tourist is an entirely unappealing identity, devoid of the authenticating ambivalence and ironic distancing of the Gen-X slacker who is the embodiment of a self-imposed and simulated vagabond identity. A current example of our reverse reading of Bauman's model occurs in celebrity chef Anthony Bourdain, who hosts The Travel Channel's *No Reservations* and gains ironic admiration and

Alan Moore and Brian Bolland's *The Killing Joke* depicts Batman and The Joker as a deeply bonded homosocial buddy pair.

In *Watchmen,* Nite Owl II, aka Dan Dreiberg, is a geek scientist. He observes the laws his government levies against superheroes, he is

authenticity for his simulated vagabond-ness and ability to travel to locations loved and frequented by natives. Bourdain's punk ethos and his history of drug use are foregrounded in his star text much more prominently than his matriculation at Vassar. Slackers are self-perceived outcasts, invested in sub-cultural geekiness in ways related to their attempts at false ethnicity.

A third term, nomad, may allow our manipulation of Bauman's model to gain more nuance. If the tourist is overtly privileged, and the vagabond a migrant laborer, then the nomad sees him or herself as the free will traveler somewhere in between. Our model is invested in the nomad's disdain for the tourist and admiration of the vagabond. Despite this disdain for the tourist, from an economic perspective nomads have much more in common with tourists than they do with vagabonds. In fact, as with Bourdain and the vagabond, similarities between nomads and vagabonds are most often brought about through the nomad's simulation of or self-imposed vagabond-ness.

Geeks and proto-slackers of the late 1980s were heavily into comics, and helped lay the groundwork for major multimedia synergy between comic books and motion pictures in the 1990s and beyond. In part this is because the Warner Communications Inc. (WCI) media conglomerate launched a long-term, comprehensive multimedia marketing and distribution campaign in order to determine whether or not an adult, mainstream audience existed for a post-Adam-West Batman franchise. As political economist Eileen Meehan documents,

> "The mid-1980s marked the beginning of a process in which [WCI] tested the waters and began building towards the release of [Tim Burton's] *Batman* [film]. By issuing [Frank Miller's] *The Dark Knight Returns* in comic form, WCI essentially test marketed a dark reinterpretation of Batman with an adult readership whose experience with the character would include the camp crusader of the 1960s." (53)

Miller's comic sold out, including a hardbound omnibus edition, and spread to new non-comics reading markets:

> "WCI [placed] *The Dark Knight Returns* in different kinds of retail outlets, tapping the markets of fandom and general readers to determine if the grim version of Batman could gain acceptance from both specialized and generalized consumers" (53).

It worked. Indeed, Gen-X indie filmmaker Kevin Smith raves about 1989 being "the summer of *Batman*" and Moore's, Miller's, and Burton's "Dark Age" works would impact many Gen-X media makers, like filmmakers Zack Snyder and Christopher Nolan.

The ascendancy of the geek in conjunction with the geek's abiding foil, the slacker, makes important an examination of the configuration of the geek-slacker duo in Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen* (1986-1987),[14] analyzing this dynamic primarily in the context of the relationship between Nite Owl II and Rorschach. *Watchmen's* depiction of this duo and its simultaneous deconstruction of binary superhero teams reverberates into the mainstream and independent graphic novels which follow it, including the texts of already existing pairings, such as Batman and Robin, Batman and Joker, and Superman and Batman, as well as pairings in second-wave

Dreiberg fantasizes about himself being a slacker, a non-caring superhero like his partner Rorschach, and dreams about improprieties he could never commit, like sleeping with his former enemy, the Twilight Lady.

In contrast, Rorschach, the slacker, is antisocial and doesn't care what other people think about him.

postmodern superhero comics such as the Confessor and Altar Boy in Kurt Busiek's *Astro City* (1995-present), and Christian Walker and Deena Pilgrim in Brian Michael Bendis' *Powers* (2000-present). Independent graphic novels, such as Daniel Clowes' *Ghost World* (1993-1997), with Enid Coleslaw and Rebecca Doppelmeyer, also inherit from the cultural patterns to which Moore contributed. In short, *Watchmen* has exerted a profound influence on the unfolding geek-slacker ascension across multiple media formats.

The configuration of the geek and the slacker lines up respectively with Bauman's configuration of the tourist and vagabond and makes clear that while the geek and tourist are economically empowered, a crisis of authenticity surrounds the geek's discomfort with his privileged status as a "tourist" under globalization and causes the geek to admire the slacker's more authentic seeming rejection of privilege.

In *Watchmen,* Nite Owl II, aka Dan Dreiberg, is a geek scientist. He observes the laws his government levies against superheroes, he is comfortable retiring from superheroism, and like a true fan boy and prototypical geek, he collects memorabilia from the various eras of superheroism. Dreiberg fantasizes about himself being a slacker, a non-caring superhero like his partner Rorschach, and dreams about improprieties he could never commit, like sleeping with his former enemy, the Twilight Lady. In contrast, Rorschach, the slacker, is antisocial and doesn't care what other people think about him. Unlike Dreiberg, Rorschach follows his own code above any other and in that way maintains an authenticity (and ultimately a "coolness" that escapes geeks in the larger framework of geek-slackerdom) that Dreiberg cannot. An important part of Rorschach's authenticity (and the authenticity of subsequent Generation X slackers) within the geek-slacker paradigm is an unwavering commitment to the homosocial bond he maintains with his geek, Dreiberg – similar to the Joker-Batman relationship in Moore's *The Killing Joke* and the films based on it, like Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* (2008). In contrast to Rorschach, and in the pattern of many of the Generation X geeks who will follow him, Dreiberg seeks out a girlfriend and privileges his relationship with her over his homosocial bonds.

Dreiberg and Rorschach's attempt to defeat Ozymandias in *Watchmen* is a geek-slacker revolt against the father. *Watchmen* reveals how the geek-slacker pairing encourages an attempt to replace patriarchy with fratriarchy: the corporate industrialist Ozymandias is a clear embodiment of the late capitalism that subsequent geek-slackers are often positioned to melodramatically struggle against, often just as futilely as Dreiberg and Rorschach do. Geek-slacker binaries continue to suffuse superhero and non-superhero pairings in comics as well as other media, including some of the currently most popular texts, such as *Juno, Knocked Up, Superbad,* and *No Country for Old Men* (all 2007).

Geeks and slackers hang together in contemporary media texts, and indeed geek culture, in the form of science fiction, computers, superhero comic books, video games, etc., is deeply imbricated with the grunge music, underemployment, and pot smoking culture of 1990s slackers. In fact, we can say that to some extent geeks are productive, conformist slackers and/or that slackers are cynical, nonconformist geeks. In the independent films of Kevin Smith, for example, where the geeks and the slackers frequently share geeky passions like knowledge of 1980s science-fiction cinema and superhero comic books, the line between these two character types are overlapped and blurry. Yet key characteristics distinguish the

Rorschach follows his own code above any other and in that way maintains an authenticity (and ultimately a "coolness" that escapes geeks in the larger framework of geek-slackerdom) that Dreiberg cannot.
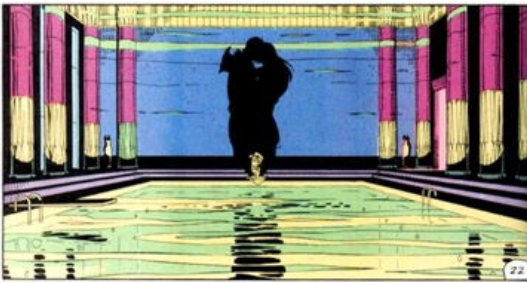
In contrast to Rorschach, and in the pattern of many of the Generation X geeks who follow him, Dreiberg seeks out a girlfriend and privileges his relationship with her over his homosocial bonds. Dreiberg stays with Laurie Juspeczyk as Rorshach is outside being obliterated by Dr. Manhattan.

Dreiberg and Rorschach's attempt to defeat Ozymandias in *Watchmen* is a fratriarchal geek-slacker revolt against the father.

geek, a type that predates Generation X, from the Gen-X slacker.

The main characteristic that differentiates the geek from his slacker counterpart is that geeks can "sell out" and become students, nine-to-five workers, filmmakers, and/or cultural tastemakers because they never truly resist the system in the first place. Geeks are good workers and social conformists who respond to social marginalization by working harder and becoming creative. As a prolific screenwriter and creator, Kevin Smith is himself such a geek, as are most of his film's protagonists. Thus, extra-filmically, geeks play a key role, perhaps *the* key role in the *production* of the "rise of the slacker" phenomenon. In a globalized capitalist system if something "rises," it is because it makes money, and the key filmmakers of slacker cinema—Smith, Richard Linklater, Jim Jarmusch, and more recently Judd Apatow—are all highly productive and market-savvy geeks who surround themselves and fill their cinematic narratives with groups of male slackers.

In fact, there is often hero worship or a wanna-be quality that adheres to the geek's perception of the slacker: for example, in *Clerks* Randal (the unapologetic slacker) tells Dante (the geeky underachiever) "you know I'm your hero" and Dante never contradicts him. In fact, Dante obviously admires Randal's devil-may-care quality even though it frequently gets him into trouble. William Miller (Patrick Fugit) is in the same position in Gen-X director Cameron Crowe's *Almost Famous* (2000): he is an under-aged, geeky journalist who loves the band he is touring with, who wants to hang out with the musicians and be considered "cool" like them, but he worries too much about his domineering mom and his writing deadline, and therefore, as Lester Bangs (Phillip Seymour Hoffman) puts it, "is not cool." But by the end of the film he lionizes his cooler road buddies, writing the *Rolling Stone* article that resuscitates the band's flagging career.

Male geek/slacker buddy duos dominate the most popular 1990s independent cinema offerings, including the work of Smith, Jarmusch, Linklater, Steven Soderbergh, Quentin Tarantino, and the Coen Brothers.

The Big Lebowski (1998), written and directed by the Coens, is a sophisticated genre pastiche of film noir, western, stoner/buddy comedy, and Busby Berkeley musical. But whether or not the average Dude fan catches the film's sly references to Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep* or Edward Dmytryk's *Murder My Sweet* is beside the point. The film has gained a widespread cult following based largely upon its slacker protagonist, The Dude (Jeff Bridges), and his close buddy relationship with geeky Vietnam veteran Walter Sobchak (John Goodman). Despite its unusually high degree of comedic and cinematic nuance, John Troyer and Chani Marchiselli rightly group *The Big Lebowski* with other works of "Dude Cinema," which appeal to male-centered audiences eager to see 1990s and millennial slacker masculinity comedically celebrated. The film is one of the most popular and influential "cult" films of the 1990s, spawning an entire cottage industry around its fandom and inspiring annual "Lebowski Fests" in various cities around the country since 2002.

The corporate industrialist Ozymandias is a clear embodiment of the late capitalism that subsequent geek-slackers are often positioned to melodramatically struggle against, often just as futilely as do Dreiberg and Rorschach.

Randal and Dante, a paradigmatic Generation X slacker/geek buddy duo from Kevin Smith's 1994 independent film *Clerks*.

The Dude and Walter, a slacker/geek buddy pair from the immensely popular cult film *The Big Lebowski*.

As a counterpart to the striving geek, the figure of the slackerish dude is associated with "masculine entitlement" even though he is, to some extent, a "liminal subject," especially as presented in *The Big Lebowski*, where he appears as a lazy, unemployed stoner (264). As Troyer and Marchiselli outline, "dudes are slobs, slackers, idiot savants whose achievements are fated and manifest. The obliteration of history that is always implicit in dude films works to obscure [the dude protagonists'] gender and class privileges" (265). Troyer and Marchiselli focus upon Dude Cinema narratives' obliteration of history, rather than the invocation of the tropes of melodrama, to demonstrate these films' obfuscation of the socioeconomic privilege of white geeks and slackers. While their argument is convincing, it is not as broadly applicable as our melodrama-based model, though their assertion that the buddy duos that populate these films "never entirely ascend into phallic adulthood but exist in a kind of adolescent stasis" is spot-on (266). *The Big Lebowski*'s famous catch phrase, "the Dude abides," encapsulates the problem. It is easy for a white male stoner to simply "abide" because the deck is already stacked in his favor, yet his status as a relative outsider, a so-called "loser" that the "square community doesn't give a shit about," allows him to occupy a quasi-disenfranchised position, gaining him access to simulated ethnicity via the tropes of geek melodrama.

Since to some extent independent and cult cinema function as early barometers of pop-cultural trends, we should not be surprised to find that more recently, since 2007, geek- and slacker-centered narratives have risen into the cinematic mainstream with the films of Judd Apatow (*Knocked Up* and *Superbad*), the comedies of Adam Sandler (*I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry*) and Will Ferrell (*Blades of Glory*), and even network television programs such as CBS' *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-present). Jim Parsons, who plays Sheldon Cooper, the most socially awkward and sesquipedalian character on *The Big Bang Theory*, surprised critics by winning Best Lead Actor in a Comedy Series at the 62nd Primetime Emmy Awards, beating out heavy hitting Emmy veterans including Tony Shalhoub, Larry David, Steve Carrell, and Alec Baldwin. Mainstream media outlets announced Parsons' victory with headlines like, "Geeks, Rejoice!" and "Geek Out!", and tech/ geek centric blogs across the web posted clips from his acceptance speech.

The fratriarchal order depicted in shows like *Big Bang Theory* is no less misogynistic (nor homophobic) than the patriarchy it (arguably) attempts to subvert. Slacker cinema and Gen-X geek media of all kinds are relentlessly male-centered, focusing on more feminized / queered / sympathetic males than other genres perhaps, yet still marginalizing women, queers, and people of color.

Conclusion

In her essay "Why Nice Guys Finish Last," queer feminist writer Julia Serano offers a more sympathetic take on geek suffering that bears mentioning because if our thesis is correct, our essay serves as an answer to her call for sympathy for male geeks or "nice guys" as she calls them. She introduces a phenomenon she calls the "double bind for men" (232). Her explanation makes use of the more documented female double bind which is created by sexual object/prey stereotypes of women, and reduces women to choosing between being considered either a "virgin" or a "whore." In Serano's male double bind, the options are between "nice guy" and

Leonard and Sheldon, the geek protagonists of *The Big Bang Theory.* Jim Parsons, who plays Sheldon, surprised critics by winning Best Lead Actor in a Comedy Series at the 62nd Primetime Emmy Awards, beating out heavy hitting Emmy veterans like Tony Shalhoub, Larry David, Steve Carrell, and Alec Baldwin.

In *The Invention of Lying,* there is a missing character: the true geek female counterpart to Ricky Gervais's character, the one who is loved for her brains and not for her looks, the way Gervais is. This missing character lays bare the misogyny of geek melodrama.

"asshole." To introduce her insights, Serano foregrounds her identity as a male to female transexual and speaks of having suffered under the male double bind and watching male friends suffer and transform under it as well. With this move, Serano essentially positions herself as formerly one of the male geeks we examine (Serano 232). In that sense, she can serve as a counterpoint to our criticism of male geek self-righteousness and rigged identity politics. Serano explains that as boys, males are enculturated to be gentle to women, but when they reach adulthood, those who are conscientious enough to maintain this civility suffer because women are not attracted to nice guys. She recounts the stereotypical story of being consulted and confided in by her female friends as a nice guy before her sex change, but never being seen by them as a potential mate. As a result of this, many of Serano's nice guy friends became "assholes" to attract women.

Serano falls into the sexist move we have ascribed to geek masculinity. The stereotypical "nice guys finish last" phenomenon can only occur if one maintains the assumption that women don't know what's good for them and end up with assholes, or must suffer with an asshole before ending up with a geek, this latter the central trope in so much of the media we have discussed in this essay. Serano raises a counterpoint to her own argument that resonates well with our theories: she cites the feminist blogosphere as the source for this unsympathetic reading of the nice guy phenomenon. These feminist bloggers identify what they call The Nice Guy with capital letters. They explain that unlike the suffering nice guy that Serano attempts to reify, The Nice Guy is often as dangerous as the "asshole." For his good behavior, The Nice Guy feels entitled to be rewarded sexually and socially by women, and becomes enraged and condescending about women's desires if this entitlement goes unfulfilled. This description ties in nicely to the critique of geek masculinity we theorize and leads us to a final question.

What of the female geek? For the geek conceit to play out in its most misogynistic form, she must be missing. Here is a case study of this phenomena from a recent text. In *The Invention of Lying,* self-described pudgy and nerdy Ricky Gervais vanquishes handsome jock Rob Lowe to end up paired with the beautiful Jennifer Garner, after Garner's character "comes to her senses" and recognizes the value of her geeky friend. The problem is that with the exception of their genders, demographically and behaviorally speaking, Garner and Lowe's characters are virtually identical. One (Lowe) is punished for not being a geek, that is, being a jock, while the other (Garner) is elevated for her lack of geekiness because she is required to act as the reward the geek or "nice guy" feels entitled to in traditional patriarchal narratives. There is a missing character: the true geek female counterpart to Gervais's character, the one who is loved for her brains and not for looks, as Gervais is. This missing character lays bare the misogyny of geek melodrama.

Go to Notes page

To top   Print version   JC 54   *Jump Cut* home

Notes

1. Even John Hodgman, the speaker who "roasted" Barack Obama at the 2009 Radio and Television Correspondents' Association dinner in Washington, D.C., highlights through his very presence the prevalence of Jobs and Gates in geek culture. In Macintosh commercials Hodgman plays the stodgier, less hip human embodiment of non-Macintosh computers that use a Windows operating system. Like Justin Hammer, Hodgman's character is another unflattering analog for Bill Gates. [return to page 1]

2. There is a history of Jewish male images and responses to notions of Jewish men as nebbishes. This sometimes plays out as extreme masculine prowess/obsession with sports or athleticism. For example, *Triumph of the Spirit* (1989), portrays the story of Greek Jewish boxer and Holocaust survivor Salamo Arouch who was forced to fight by his German captors. *Invincible* (2001) revisits this theme with a plot inspired by the life of Jewish strongman Zishe Breitbart and similarly shows its hyper-masculine protagonist in contrast to German Nazis. [return to page 2]

3. Note also a Jewish comedy tradition, e.g., Lenny Bruce, Woody Allen, and Allen's influence on proto-slackerism in the form of the *nebbish* Jim (Jason Biggs), protagonist of *American Pie*. See also Walter Mitty.

4. Following William Strauss and Neil Howe, we define Boomers as being those persons born between 1943 and 1960.

5. Non-apologists for Crumb, who read him as unapologetically racist and/or misogynistic, should nevertheless find value in our critical reading of Crumb's persona and work.

6. R. Crumb's id (as a character no less) and "Li'l Hitler Pig" appear in Crumb's work just as Frank appears in David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986). Lynch and Crumb work in the mode of Boomer geeks. The Boomers resisted hippies and formed strong geek identities that would make the Gen-X geek's rise to cultural prevalence possible.

7. Again, it is important to acknowledge that Crumb's intention here is arguably ironic psychodrama rather than melodrama, but the melodrama survives regardless.

8. Some noteworthy late Boomer / pre-Generation X Geeks include: Alan Moore (b. 1953), Frank Miller (b. 1957), Jim Jarmusch (b.1953), Michael Moore (b. 1954), comics artist Charles Burns (b. 1955), Joel and Ethan Coen

(b. 1954 and 1957), Cameron Crowe (b. 1957), Spike Lee (b. 1957), and David O. Russell (b. 1958).

9. Interestingly, Dreyfuss himself appears in one scene in *The Graduate*; he plays a lodger in Mr. McCleery's boarding house in Berkeley, delivering the single line: "Shall I get the cops?"

10. Richard Dreyfuss is a key figure in the rise of cinematic geekdom, playing the geek hero of three significant and immensely popular 1970s films: *American Graffitti* (1973), *Jaws* (1975) and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977).

11. Note the return of the Boomer geeks in 2008 with *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*. Interviewed in *Entertainment Weekly* #988/989 (April 25 / May 2, 2008) both Spielberg and Lucas claim to be forever suspended in their 20s or 30s. Says Lucas:

> "We are not gonna get gray. We are not gonna get old. We are as young as we've ever been, and we don't recognize the fact that we've gotten older. Do we?" Spielberg replies: "It's true. I'll never forget when I was making *Jaws*, [producer] David Brown said, 'I'm nearly 60 years old and I feel like I'm 24.' I've always felt that way about myself. [. . .] I've always sort of time-locked and mind-blocked myself in my 30s, and that's always the age I feel" (35).

12. Key Gen-X geeks include Richard Linklater (b. 1960), Alexander Payne (b. 1961), Daniel Clowes (b. 1961), Mike Judge (b. 1962), David Fincher (b. 1962), Steven Soderbergh (b. 1963), Quentin Tarantino (b. 1963), David Cross (b. 1964), Joss Whedon (b. 1964), Ben Stiller (b. 1965), Jon Favreau (b. 1966), Judd Apatow (b. 1967), Will Ferrell (b. 1967), Kevin Smith (b. 1970), Sarah Silverman (b. 1970), and Diablo Cody (b. 1978).

13. This is somewhat counterintuitive to Bauman's emphasis that the vagabond is in a constant state of admiration of the tourist's economic empowerment. Our reading of Bauman acknowledges the tourist's desire for the authenticity of the vagabond in order to shed light on Gen-X anxieties surrounding discomfort with their privileged status as "tourists" under globalization. []

14. *Watchmen* being a major comics milestone in Gen-X and comic book culture.

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Babel's national frames in global Hollywood

by [Leisa Rothlisberger]

Based on *Babel*'s tagline, "If you want to be understood, listen," and director Alejandro González Iñárritu's statements, the film is about human miscommunication and personal human conflicts. However, its treatment of characters and events on a global scale reveal its entrenchment in political and economic issues.

Shots throughout *Babel* emphasize reconciliation following human suffering. This still of Richard and Susan Jones holding hands right before she is accidentally shot indicates the potential of their relationship.

According to director Alejandro González Iñárritu, his 2006 film *Babel*

> "is about how our everyday lives are affected by walls, miscommunications and barriers" (quoted in Michael).

Elsewhere, González Iñárritu emphasizes that what he

> "want[ed] to make clear in the film [is] that it's not about the physical borders, it's not the politics of the government, it's about the politics of the human" (quoted in Stratton).

Though González Iñárritu acknowledges the film uses contemporaneous sociopolitical issues as a backdrop, he repeatedly stresses that the humanistic aspects of *Babel* are primary.[1] [open endnotes in new window] While the personal human conflicts of the film may be at the center of the message the filmmaker was trying to communicate, the film's narrative development reveals its attitude toward and placement in the current globally-interconnected landscape.

The film melodramatically depicts characters in geographically diverse locations who struggle to communicate with one another and their respective environments. The interconnected storylines are put together like puzzle pieces that are not aligned chronologically or geographically, but the gist of the story is as follows: A well-off U.S. couple, Robert and Susan (played by Brad Pitt and Cate Blanchett), leave their children in San Diego with their Mexican nanny, Amelia (Adriana Barraza), while they vacation in Morocco. While touring the country by bus, Susan is hit in the shoulder by a rifle shot. The shot was fired by a young Moroccan, Yussef (non-professional actor, Boubker Ait El Caid), whose father purchased the rifle from another Moroccan who received the rifle as a gift from a wealthy Japanese man (Kôji Yakusho) for being his hunting guide. As a result, police are sent to the Japanese man's house to investigate whether the rifle was stolen. The police have a hard time getting in touch with the Japanese man, but they do interact with his attention-deprived deaf-mute daughter, Chieko (Rinko Kikuchi), who assumes they are investigating the recent suicide of her mother. Through her contact with the police, she is unwittingly pulled into the international crisis of which she would otherwise have been completely oblivious. As the film unfolds, the audience gradually becomes aware of how the various segments are linked, but throughout, the diverse characters suffer because of their global interactions.

While González Iñárritu emphasizes the personal aspects of the film, its interconnecting storylines reflect its participation in recent trends in world cinema. For example, it fits into David Bordwell's category "network narratives," which has broad implications for the film's depiction of its contemporaneous global circumstances. For Bordwell, the

> "central formal principle [of network narratives] is that several
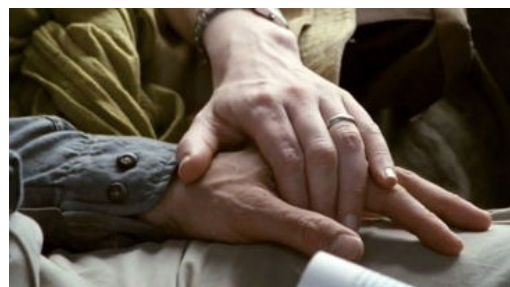
This still toward the end of the film shows the Japanese father and daughter coming to a non-verbal understanding by holding hands. Notice that both of these images of mutual understanding and physical support involve upper class characters.

protagonists are given more or less the same weight as they participate in intertwining plotlines. Usually these lines affect one another to some degree. The characters might be strangers, slight acquaintances, friends, or kinfolk. The film aims to show a larger pattern underlying their individual trajectories" (Bordwell 1).

Several other film critics have characterized this trend similarly:

"*Variety*'s critics call them crisscrossers, others call them thread structures or interwoven stories" (Bordwell 1).[2]
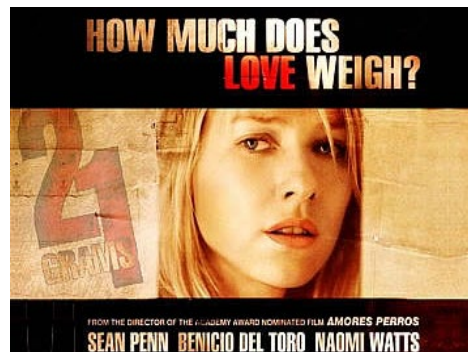
Babel's interconnecting storylines make it similar to other films as "network narratives," including *Crash* (2004), *Traffic* (2000), and even the first two films in González Iñárritu's loose trilogy: *Amores perros* (2000) and *21 Grams* (2003).

The movie posters also emphasize the interpersonal conflicts by presenting the faces of the main characters. Check out David Bordwell's blog post on *Babel* for more on network narratives.

Similar films include *Crash* (2004), *Nine Lives* (2005), *Traffic* (2000), and even the first two films in González Iñárritu's loose trilogy: *Amores perros* (2000) and *21 Grams* (2003). While the narratives hold audience interest well, they also portray the effects of globalization; as *New York Times* film critic A. O. Scott suggests, they tell

"small stories with big implications, examining the lives of individuals .

Despite the previous images of tender support, a gun is the impetus for the film's action. In the first scene the gun is exchanged between a Moroccan hunting guide and a goatherd. While the camera seems to be introducing us to human characters by shifting focus during the exchange, the significance of the gun's role is also emphasized. Though it is in the periphery in the shots, the gun's persistent visibility in this sequence indicates its centrality to the events the film portrays. The camera shows the viewer various members of the Moroccan family, but over the course of the film we find out as much about the gun's history as the family's, perhaps more.

. . in a way that suggests large, invisible forces pushing them through their passive, melancholy lives" (1).

Thus, *Babel*'s narrative structure has the potential to illustrate global processes, even if through a humanistic lens.

Babel's affective force may come from the commonalities of human suffering, but the logistics and causes of the struggles depicted in the film reveal its response to globalization policies and trends. In an article on *Babel*, Deborah Shaw suggests the characters, who are mostly stereotypical,

> "are connected within the text by their suffering: a reduction of heterogeneity is sought through an appeal to a universality of emotion and a globalised form of pain in a bid to create the sense of a 'world village' where we all care about each other" (Shaw 22).

Shaw quotes González Iñárritu to corroborate her articulation of the importance of common suffering in *Babel*; the director asserts that the causes for sadness are common across borders and socioeconomic divisions. However,

> "this type of universality that rests on personal suffering is formed in the marketplace, and relies on melodramatic structures to pull in audiences" (Shaw 23).

Thus, the universal human experiences emphasized by the film rest on commercial principles that create divisions between audiences and the diverse characters the film introduces to them. Furthermore, the very socioeconomic realities the universal suffering purportedly negates are the logistical links among the characters. Those pragmatic connections reveal the realities of contemporaneous global processes, which not only make the series of events depicted plausible, but also influence the film's relationship to the concept of world cinema and its complicated production details.

The vocabulary González Iñárritu and his collaborating screenwriter, Guillermo Arriaga, use to tell the interconnected stories shows their concern with the way commodities and individuals are treated differently by specific processes that impel globalization. In particular, the film's logic comments on the prevalent influence of neoliberal free trade agreements and post-9/11 anxiety about terrorism and immigration. While melodrama pulls the audience in and the characters universally suffer, the geographically disparate storylines are connected by individual characters' international travel (though they travel for different reasons) and the exchanges of a rifle. The way these mobile entities — the gun and individuals — are treated in the plot, by the camera, and by other characters, reveals a logic that favors the gun's movement but also implies that global interaction has disastrous consequences for the poor, marginalized characters. The stories' connections demonstrate how free trade policy and post-9/11 anti-immigration sentiment as exacerbated by the war on terror has shaped the way cultures, commodities, and individuals are treated differently from one another even though they are more interconnected and have more contact with and influence on one another than ever before.

Babel exemplifies some of the major conflicts encountered with globalization — alongside the possibilities facilitated by increased worldwide interconnectivity. It also illustrates the unevenness of the distribution of these global opportunities. The gun serves as the logistical connection between the U.S. tourists in Morocco, the Moroccan family, and the Japanese father and daughter. Each character's relation to the gun has negative consequences, but by the end of the film, the poorer characters suffer the most because of it. As Bordwell puts it,

> "despite Iñárritu's claim that the film is about family and personal communication, something else is going on. After all, the drama is

The gun, which was previously owned by a Japanese man, traversed geopolitical borders without trouble. When individuals cross national borders without official permission, the film shows the consequences to be devastating. Indicative of this, even though there is an agreement between the United States and Mexico to facilitate exchange, the actual border is shown to be congested and not welcoming to humans. We see this in the shots accompanying Amelia's trip to her son's wedding south of the U.S.-Mexico border. The border patrol is ever-present and there are signs warning against crossing illegally. The film presents these images through the eyes of two young U.S. children entering Mexico for the first time with their Mexican nanny, making the conditions of the border seem exotic and dangerous.

In fact, in response to young Mike's observation that his mom always tells him that Mexico is really dangerous, Santiago, Amelia's nephew, tells him sarcastically that it's dangerous because it's full of Mexicans. Behind the sarcasm is the reality that the United States and Mexico are inextricably linked. Among other connections, so many commodities purchased by U.S. consumers originate in Mexico.

fundamentally about how prosperous white people have to suffer because Asian, Mexican, and North African men have guns" (Bordwell 3).

Indeed, the prosperous people suffer, the others take the blame, and one news reporter announces at the end of the film, the "Americans, once again, have their happy ending." This ending re-affirms the privileged position of the U.S. citizens. Bordwell's focus on the gun reveals that as the link between the characters, it represents economic and violent power. Accordingly, the film suggests that when in the possession of power, the underprivileged will use it irresponsibly with violent consequences for the global order.

That the film privileges the U.S. citizens and the upper class characters in general may be a reflection of how the world really works, but they also indicate the film's conservative political attitude (see Tierney). Nevertheless, *Babel* confronts issues of national labels and their destructiveness, especially with the propensity for movement across national borders in the global era. The fact that it depicts crises that occur when people and commodities cross borders and their national labels determine their interactions indicates the negative potential of such labeling. This is true for the rifle, a symbolic commodity, as well as the individuals who are labeled by their citizenship in the media and legal assessments of their cross-border connections.

Though the film is driven by affect, the differences among the way commodities and individuals are treated according to their national label and contact with territory other than their own have implications for the film's situation in the global market as both a commodity and symbolic representative of culture. In the course of this essay, I argue that the differences between the way the gun is treated as a commodity and the way the women are victimized in association with their national labels are analogues of *Babel*'s complicated production details and classification in world, Mexican, or Hollywood cinema.

To explain the way the film's interconnecting narratives represent its own situation, I first discuss the implications of the way culture and commodities are treated differently in the global era and, second, how this is exemplified by the film's depiction of the respective trajectories of the gun and individuals — mostly victimized females — who are framed nationally by the global crisis. Then I show that the film cannot be solely categorized as a cultural representative or commodity even though national frames are placed upon it in a way that parallels what happens to the female victims of the film's plot. This is dramatized through the symbolically disjunctive segues between the varying film segments.

In the concluding section, we see that even though there is an impulse, even in the globally interconnected world, to determine national provenance, the film warns against asking whether it is Mexican because of the hypocrisy it reveals. The film participates in a global cinema through the range of the film's storylines in Morocco, along the U.S.-Mexico border, and in Japan. Though I expand on this later, the film's relation to a singular national label is further complicated by its Mexican creative staff, its U.S. Hollywood funding, and its regional actors from each location. Moreover, the film was successfully distributed worldwide; it made more money outside the United States than in (it made more than $34 million domestically and more than $100 million abroad).[3] While these global markers are not abnormal for Hollywood-funded projects, many scholars still focus on the national provenance of the director and creative staff for indications of the national characteristics of the film. *Babel* comments on the effects of national labeling and media influence in the pragmatic interconnections between the characters and the way those links are depicted to the audience.

Culture and commodities in the global era

Matching photographs prove the connection between the Moroccan hunting guide and the Japanese businessman. It also indicates that the gun was not sold (or stolen) on the black market by the Moroccan goatherds accused of being terrorists.

The film shows the Japanese man's copy when a police officer respectfully visits his apartment.

In contrast, the Moroccan man is only given the opportunity to show the police his copy of the photo after he has been accused of being a terrorist, threatened, and beaten up.

Despite the filmmaker's insistence on the humanist focus of the film, *Babel* illustrates conditions for cross-border contact that are particular to the film's historical moment and its situation among many nations. It takes up the anxiety generated in the United States by the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the "war on terror," both of which have been accompanied by an anti-immigration fervor and the propensity to falsely fear all Arabs as terrorists. Addressing the question of the film's national provenance and its ability to point out the hypocritical, uneven treatment of entities from different nations in the global era, Shaw points out that these are global concerns focalized through a U.S. perspective, which further privileges the United States and its citizens in the film's schema (15). Shaw argues that the film's implicit U.S. perspective compromises its participation in the utopian "world village" that it intended to portray. Moreover, the consequences for characters, like the Mexican ones, who have distinct roles in the U.S. imaginary, paradoxically contradict the lived experiences of the creative staff from Mexico. Specifically, in addition to its critique of post-9/11 fearmongering, the film's depiction of a Mexican working illegally in the United States as a nanny for upper-class children is specific to U.S.-Mexican relations. Even though economic exchange between the United States and Mexico has amplified in recent decades, specifically with the 1994 implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), U.S. policies and sentiment continue to disdain the Mexican presence in the United States. NAFTA reasserts the long-standing relations among Mexico, the United States, and Canada, but in many regards it reinforces the power differential between Mexico and its northern neighbors, especially because of the way U.S. capital is welcome in Mexico but Mexican citizens are still rejected from U.S. territory. The contrast between the derision of human movement and the acceptance of a commodity's movement typifies the inequalities perpetuated by free trade agreements — and is also dramatized significantly in *Babel*.

With the implementation of NAFTA, commodities, as representatives of capital, are treated very differently from individuals. This is common to neoliberal trade policy, but because of the deep cultural connections between the United States and Mexico the distinction has far-reaching repercussions. This is further complicated for products, like films, that are both cultural representatives and commodities. In fact, in order to try to keep products of the cultural industries from the competition of the free market, Canada insisted on a cultural exemption in NAFTA that allows Canada to take protectionist measures to support its cultural industries. Though the exemption has become more symbolic than effective because of other NAFTA provisions and Canada's accession into other free trade agreements that do not have similar cultural protections, the fact that the negotiations focused on such measures indicates the perceived significance of the combination of culture and free market principles (see Goodenough and Beale, for examples).

As culture industries commodities have received attention in free trade negotiations, scholars have commented on how media and culture have been characterized traditionally. Toby Miller, co-author of *Global Hollywood*, asserts,

> "in the embarrassingly macho language of U.S. political science, the media represent 'soft power' to match the 'hard power' of the military and the economy" (Miller, et al. 104).

For one example, Miller cites an article by Joseph Nye, a political scientist at Harvard, in which media influence, including film and cultural influence, is characterized as feminine and delicate, but also attractive and persuasive—in contrast to the macho "hard power" of military and economic policies that are more direct and forceful (see Nye 545). Nye acknowledges that the two types of power must be used together to benefit the purposes of the U.S. state. In the inclusion of the cultural industries in neoliberal trade agreements, soft and hard power have combined with significant consequences. While the culture industries

Amelia and Santiago attempt to cross back into the United States after Amelia's son's wedding with Mike and Debbie (the kids Amelia babysits) asleep in the back of the car. The border officials treat them as suspects, searching the car and making them nervous.

Santiago, Amelia's nephew, becomes increasingly agitated in this scene. Here, as Amelia searches her bag for a note from Mike and Debbie's parents to prove her relationship to them and show their permission to take the kids out of the country, the camera focuses on Santiago to encourage the audience to pay attention to his agitated state.

When the border officers shine the flashlight in Santiago's face, he becomes even more perturbed by the way he is treated. The light overwhelms him because it is unnaturally harsh, like the treatment he receives from the border officers.

used to be thought of as in need of essential protection, now the U.S. position is that "entertainment should be treated as a business," because it is: it is hugely successful and brings in huge amounts of money for U.S. companies (García Canclini, *Consumers and Citizens* 98). Though the transition to include culture industries in agreements like NAFTA shows an acknowledgement that the audiovisual industries are huge business powers, it does not calm others' concerns about the potentially deleterious effects of having Hollywood films dominate screens around the world. The clear motivator is the desire to capitalize on commodities, a justification strongly supported by neoliberal ideology.[4] Consequently, the policy makers disregard the cultural effects. Because media influence is still thought of as "soft power," the policy makers do not acknowledge the destructive effects of framing bodies as national and gendered according to how they are categorized and dealt with through the "macho" power of political and economic influence.

The different treatment of representatives of culture and commodities collides in *Babel*, particularly in the contradictions between the mobility of the gun and the so-labeled illegal migration of Amelia, the Mexican nanny. Though the gun moves unhindered across borders, when it changes ownership and then is used irresponsibly, the national classifications placed on it are reviewed to determine the legality of its being owned and traded by Moroccans. By presuming the gun's exchange between the Japanese man and the Moroccans was illegal, the government officials working behind the scenes in the storylines of *Babel* reveal prejudices against the underprivileged. In the end, officials determine that the gun moved legally across borders, but the fact that the international police force became so involved shows the concern for national origins of products under globalizing policies.

Similarly, under NAFTA, goods can move freely across borders when their national origin is determined to be one of the North American signatory countries. As set out in the NAFTA document, their national origin is determined by complicated formulae that take into consideration the origins and value of materials from around the world, as well as the location of transformative production. As in *Babel*, the commodity has to be authorized to confirm the legitimacy of its movement. Because the gun was exchanged between individuals, instead of between a recognized seller and a customer, its exchange was not trusted and had to be tracked, engaging individuals from around the globe in the crisis.

As we see with the gun, even though free trade policies have a hierarchical logic determining which products can be sold in which nations, inanimate commodities cross borders freely. Here, the literal danger represented by the gun marks the irony of the preferential treatment commodities are given. People do not enjoy that same mobility, despite the frequent necessity of their movement. In *Babel*, people move and interact globally, but only upper class individuals are able to cross borders without disastrous end results.

The results of unauthorized human movement are seen most drastically when Amelia takes Robert and Susan's children across the U.S.-Mexican border. Amelia's son's wedding was scheduled to take place shortly after Robert and Susan would return from their trip to Morocco. Because of the delay in Robert and Susan's return home and their inability to find another caretaker for the children, Amelia decides to take the children she cares for to the wedding. On the way back to San Diego, border officers question Amelia about the two white children asleep in the back of the car and ask for notes from the children's parents giving permission for Amelia to take them out of the United States, paperwork Amelia does not have. The car's driver, Amelia's nephew, gets nervous and drives through the barricades into the darkness of the desert.[5] He tells Amelia and the kids to get out of the car, thinking it will be better if they find their way to safety on their own, but the natural elements and lack of direction overwhelm the three.

Upon finding Amelia, who left the children to search for help on her own, U.S. border officials only pay attention to her legal status in relation to the two nations.

Once the border officer dealing with Santiago starts giving him further instructions, Santiago feels he is being yelled at. He rashly decides to drive through the barricades and escape the border officials' treatment.

She did not have the official paperwork to allow her to live and work in the United States, so she is reduced to the body that was ill-equipped to deal with the border space; she becomes nothing more than an "illegal alien."[6] Though she had been characterized throughout the film as a benevolent caretaker, once she is labeled an illegal alien, the camera follows the lead of the border officials and only focuses on her overexposed body—she is not even allowed to see the children before she is deported. Once she is labeled according to her nationality and her illegality, Amelia's natural qualities do not influence how she is treated. Instead, the suffering she experiences on the geographic border translates into strife in relation to the political border between the United States and Mexico.

The gun clearly poses more danger to the U.S. citizens than Amelia's movement across the territorial border with Mexico. Nevertheless, she is punished and her life is turned upside down while the rifle's consequences are blamed on the underprivileged who made a mistake, not the original owner of the gun. Amelia's illegal movement contrasts the U.S. couple's and the Japanese man's tourist trips, but the relatively positive endings they enjoy also contrasts with the concluding punishment suffered by the lower class characters. The gun's movement labeled as legal—despite its destructive power — illustrates the irony of the xenophobia that punishes Amelia for her cross-border actions, originally motivated by care and concern for her and her charges' well-being. As analogues for the hard and soft power employed in international affairs, the differences between the gun and Amelia's cross-border interactions in *Babel* raise questions about the film's own role in articulating international connections.


Prior to the complications at the border crossing back into the United States, Amelia is characterized as a natural, competent, compassionate caretaker of Mike and Debbie with the film's warm lighting.

She is genuinely concerned for the welfare and even helps them deal with their fears following the death of their baby brother.

At the wedding, the natural, warm lighting also presents her as a loving mother; up to this point, the film emphasizes she is able to fulfill both roles without conflict. However, after the fateful border crossing ...
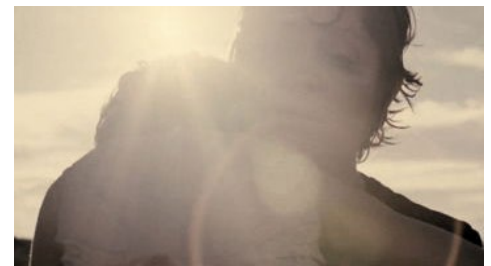
... the camera overexposes Amelia and emphasizes her inability to deal with the harsh conditions of the border — both environmental and political. Here, the sun prevents the audience from seeing Amelia's face.

Amelia's inability to deal with the conditions of her predicament is visible in the strife on her face, and that expression ironically contrasts with the rich hue of the sky. The film begins to emphasize her profile as a Mexican working illegally in the United

States.

As metonymic representatives of the effect of globalization on entities, Amelia and the gun exemplify conflicting perspectives on what film represents — as discussed above, films are understood as either commodities or representatives of culture. If we are to believe this dichotomy, then the film is either merely a commodity, like the gun, or it is solely a cultural representative that naturally crosses national borders, like Amelia. Of course, neither classification can be totally isolated, but *Babel* depicts the disastrous potential of the uneven treatment of commodities, culture, and individuals with its distinct treatment of the links generated respectively between other film elements and the gun and Amelia.

Go to page 2

To top   Print version   JC 54   *Jump Cut* home

Nationalized, victimized, feminized bodies

While the gun serves as the pragmatic connection among the storylines—as well as the object that impels the crisis—recall that the director emphasized the universal suffering depicted in the film. Amelia's travails in particular represent that suffering. Following the director's logic, she is linked to the other female characters in the film because of how she suffers on screen. Remarkably, the most prominent victims in the film are women who are vulnerable and suffer when framed according to their nationality by external entities that focus on the global context of the plot's overarching crisis. The young Moroccan boys are also victims, but the film blames their irresponsible use of the gun for the crisis. The converse of the vulnerable females, the film portrays the boys' decision to test their aim and the rifle's range as a test of their masculinity. By using female victimization as an affective link among the storylines and contrasting that link with the gun's logistical connections, the film symbolically explores the consequences of the divergent treatment of culture and commodities in the global era.


The rifle presents an opportunity for the young Moroccan brothers to compete with one another to prove who is more masculine and dominant. Their rivalry, which is the converse of the female vulnerability in the film, contributes to their rash decisions which have disastrous consequences for themselves and others.

The younger brother is more adept at aiming, which humiliates his brother and fuels his sense of masculinity in the logic of the film. Ironically, the boys'attempt to prove their masculinity indicates their relative weakness on the global scale.

Their competition escalates on the mountain while they tend their family's goats and they challenge one another to aim at distant objects. Unfortunately, the brother with good aim shoots at the bus they see driving in the distance. As Yussef aims and shoots at the distant bus...
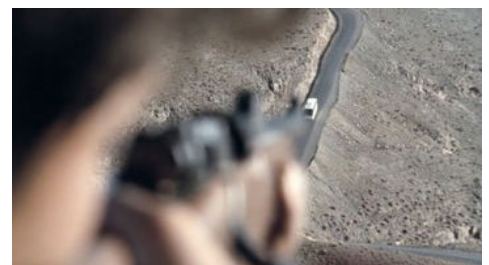
... he and the gun become blurry in the foreground, representing how the film prioritizes the consequences for the people on the bus over the consequences for the Moroccan brothers. The blurriness also indicates that the boy's actions were rash and foolish.

Amelia's transformation from capable caretaker to illegal alien is indicative of the counterproductivity of discrimination according to nationality in the global era,
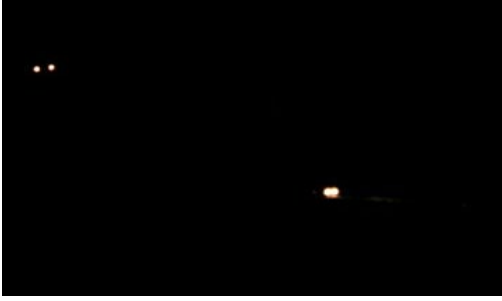
After Santiago recklessly drives through the barricades to try to escape the scrutiny of the border officials, a car chase ensues in which all we see are the headlights of the runaway vehicle and the flashing lights of the police in the dark night.

especially because of the way that kind of discrimination is specifically overcome for commodities by free trade agreements. The film's cinematic illustration of her transformation shows the barriers put in place that obfuscate her qualities as the kind woman the rest of the film established. Her suffering is palpable onscreen, but it is important to note that Amelia is not the only woman victimized in the film; other key female characters are deleteriously affected by being reduced to a female body with a national label. Because of the coordinated symbolism of cultural influence characterized as feminine in political rhetoric, the film's pattern of female suffering potently comments on the systematic treatment of culture — and women — in the increasingly globally connected world. From *Babel*'s narrative logic, we see that those connections are not necessarily controlled by the females victimized; rather, their situations are made worse by the national labels externally imposed upon them.

In particular, the way Amelia and Susan's respective trajectories are filmed and communicated show a pattern of female victimization related to national framing. Chieko, the Japanese teenager, is also the site of suffering, but her obliviousness to the international crisis and the way she is pulled into it brings us to the same point about the negative consequences of the way the storylines are interconnected on political lines. If we keep in mind the filmmakers' emphasis on universal suffering, it is logical that we see characters suffer, but the film's focus on female bodies as vulnerable sites indicates the perpetuation of traditional characterizations of women and culture. For Marina Hassapopoulou, in *Babel*,

> "suffering is deceptively individualized to detract from the fact that female bodies are actually the ones that become sites of melodramatic suffering" (9).

Even though the film devotes much of its screen time and narrative to the plights of its female protagonists, "that is mostly because they become passive recipients of male-induced tragedies." For Hassapopoulou,

> "*Babel*'s penchant for female victimization exposes an underlying conservatism when it comes to gender roles. Women's bodies – particularly Amelia and Susan's – become consumed by suffering... Furthermore, as we later find out, those women are not just victims of fate: they are victims of the consequences of male actions" (Hassapopoulou 9).

I go further to suggest the symbolic implications of the male actions that victimize the women—and the way their suffering is exacerbated by the political labels placed upon them. The film dramatizes these implications in such a way that it is hard to tell the filmmakers' intentions and political stance. It is possible that they are conservative in their understanding of gender stereotypes, or perhaps they depict the unjust reality in order to critique it. Regardless of their intention, their use of such a narrative vocabulary in a commercial film with global range speaks volumes about the landscape in which it was created.

The dark car chase contrasts with the hot California sun that overexposes Amelia in the next scenes. The sun blinds her and we consequently only see her as unfit for the border in much the same way that Santiago was blinded by the border officials' flashlights.

The treatment of Amelia is particularly illustrative of the film's focus on female suffering. Though Amelia is ostensibly the victim of circumstance — her employers' absence combined with her nephew's anxiety-produced rashness — she is ultimately blamed for her actions. The cinematography distances the audience from her, even though it encourages empathy for her losses. Specifically, the way her trajectory is filmed matches the limitations placed on her natural characteristics once her nationality comes to the fore. It is late at night when Amelia's nephew recklessly drives through the barricades at the border crossing, so the screen is dark, with the only light coming from the cars' headlights as it speeds through the pitch black landscape, with the flashing lights of the border officials in pursuit.

In contrast to the dark screen with little light, the next sequence overexposes Amelia and the children in the hot California sun. The sequence is filled with

The richness of the colors in these shots deceptively combine the beauty of the landscape with the strife and ugliness of Amelia's situation and treatment.

innumerable long shots of the children and Amelia wandering in the desert. The shots are stunning, with brilliant colors and a sense of how beautiful the landscape can be when observed from the perspective González Iñárritu and the audience enjoy. The sky dominates the screen with its beautiful blue, but it is balanced by the rich gold hue of the sand. Complementing the other lush colors, the dress Amelia wore to celebrate her son's wedding is a deep red. The red starkly contrasts with the natural colors of the landscape, and as the sequence continues it becomes more and more tattered. Eventually, the camera starts to focus on Amelia's ripped nylons and her dirty dress shoes, which are completely inadequate for hiking around in the desert. Despite the way the border geography abuses Amelia and the children, the camera still communicates its awesome brilliance, downplaying the characters' agony.

Minimizing Amelia's prior competence, once the border officials find her, the camera emphasizes the ugly consequences of her overexposure. She is overexposed by the sun as well as by the revelation that she was working without legal papers. When she is taken and questioned by U.S. border officials, the camera relentlessly focuses on her sunburned face, wind-chapped lips, and sand-dirtied hair. Just as the border official does not care about her lived experience, about what predicaments led her to be abandoned in the desert, caring only about her legal relation to the United States, the camera decontextualizes her and focuses only on her bodily circumstance. The camera literally and figuratively takes the position of the border official. In this sequence, the screen is mostly taken up by Amelia's face, but occasionally it shows the cheek of the border official questioning her, signifying that the camera is behind his back, looking over his shoulder. That the camera so willingly takes this perspective shows the film's propensity to side with the officials, to blame the poor, underprivileged for their rash decisions. While the camera shows an insensitivity to Amelia's former characterization, the distance it is creating between the viewer and the character indicates that the way she is officially labeled is counterintuitive to the kind woman the rest of the film shows her to be. That the camera is mediated by the border official's harsh treatment shows the dominance of the national label at this point — and illegality — placed upon Amelia — as a victimized female body.

In addition to this scene's deceptive rich hues, it shows how unfit Amelia is for traversing the border — symbolically and politically. Her ripped nylons and dusty shoes are inadequate for the desert landscape, as is her lack of U.S. gov't permission to be working in the United States as a Mexican citizen. When Amelia finally finds help, she is relieved because she thinks she will be able to save herself and the children from the border desert.

It turns out that the border patrol has been looking for her and they are eager to apprehend her as a criminal. This further distances her former characterization as kind caretaker. In this shot, we don't even see her face anymore — only her tattered dress and her being forced to assume the position assigned to culprits being arrested.

Once Amelia is in custody and being interviewed by the government official, the darker lighting and the camera's angles emphasize her sunburned face, wind-chapped lips, and sand-dirtied hair. The camera takes the position of the border official. In this sequence, the screen is mostly taken up by Amelia's face, but occasionally it shows the cheek of the border official questioning her.

That the camera so willingly takes this perspective shows the film's propensity to side with the officials, to blame the poor, underprivileged for their rash decisions. While the camera shows an insensitivity to Amelia's former characterization, the distance it is creating between the viewer and the character indicates the way she is officially treated and framed by her nationality and the geography in which she is allowed to work.

The separation between the camera and the character is especially noticeable because it starkly contrasts with the position the camera takes in the majority of the film. Often, the viewer has direct access to the main characters through frequent close-ups. Shaw notes the camera removes "any sense of distance" between the viewer and the characters to the degree that that the viewer becomes an "invisible member of the group":

> "whip pans and abrupt edits that follow conversations convert the implied viewer into one of the characters present, but invisible" (Shaw 24).

For Shaw, this camera technique encourages the "viewer to care about all the characters and empathise with their suffering" (25). While it encourages the viewer to empathize with the characters' suffering, it also gives a privileged position to the viewer, allowing her to think that she can relate to everything the character is going through. Additionally, when the close access to the character is removed, as in the case of the shots of Amelia's over-exposed body being mediated by the border official, we see that the frames placed upon the suffering bodies externally prevent us from empathizing with their plights. Even if González Iñárritu wants the film to be about universal suffering, the pragmatic aspects of the storyline belie the political implications of what causes the female bodies to suffer.

The scene with Chieko in the Japanese club exemplifies how the camera work frequently makes the audience feel like an invisible character who is part of the group. This sense is destroyed by the division between the audience and Amelia created by the border official's shoulder in previous stills, indicating that Amelia's connection to the audience is abandoned once she is labeled an illegal alien who made foolish decisions.

Perhaps the suffering female body that spends most time on screen is that of Susan Jones. After she is shot, which occurs relatively early on in the film, Susan's body is often screened in tortured positions with blood everywhere and agony apparent on her face. The extent of Susan's pain is filmed with just the kind of close-ups that Shaw argues gives the audience a privileged position and generate empathy between the characters and viewer. While these images are very affective, they are also uncomfortable to watch because of their duration. In fact, reviewers complained that the film is "unrelentingly, unremittingly sad, excruciatingly painful," especially because Cate Blanchett, who plays Susan,

> "writhes in agony for most of the film." She "writhes well, and when she screams in agonized pain after a local vet sews her bullet wound, [the reviewer] not only closed [her] eyes, but put [her] fingers in [her] ears" (Dermansky).

As Susan Jones, Cate Blanchett spends most of the time she is onscreen suffering. In the few scenes prior to this one in which she is shot while riding on a tourist bus through Morocco, she and her husband have been arguing and are clearly unhappy with their relationship. Once she is shot the rest of the time we see her she is bleeding, lying on the floor, and often writhing in pain.

Richard carries Susan through the streets of the tourist guide's town to the home of a doctor, who turns out to be a vet. As with Amelia, her female body is the site of suffering whose treatment is determined based on how she is labeled by her citizenship and the political implications of the location of her predicament.

These scenes are often shot with the kind of proximity that make the viewer feel like a character in the situation, which generates empathy and compassion in the audience for the suffering woman. This image comes after the vet has stitched up Susan's wound and she and Richard are reconciling some of their differences because of their dire situation.

Richard is on the phone with the U.S. Embassy asking for medical assistance for Susan. He is told the aid he needs is stalled because the incident is all over the news. That the publicity given the incident and the way it is labeled by gov't officials (as a terrorist attack) prevents medical assistance from reaching Susan quickly indicates the priority given gov't posturing over helping individuals, regardless of their citizenship.

Other reviewers also complain about the frequent depiction of Blanchett's tortured body, with one complaining:

> "Cate Blanchett has nothing much to do other than lie on the floor whimpering, and her prone position is emblematic of the passive agony underlying the movie's body language" (Bradshaw).

The reviewers' focus on Cate Blanchett playing the woman in agony is compounded by others noticing that though advertising and previews for the film focused on Brad Pitt's and Blanchett's participation, these two actors play a comparatively small role in the film given their star notoriety. The suffering the film depicts emphasizes the actors' bodies and frames them in ways Hollywood stars are not typically treated. In continued contrast to the audience's expectations for how the Hollywood stars and their U.S. tourist characters are treated, Susan's suffering is made more interminable by the way her body is labeled according to

News coverage seen on screens throughout the world connect the storylines superficially. Though this image comes at the end of the film, it links the Japanese police officer who has been assigned to ascertain how Chieko's father's rifle ended up in Morocco with media coverage of the incident. Throughout the film, the audience has seen and heard similar news reports, with the film's characters most often ignoring them.

her national citizenship.

Once she sustains the shot wound, Susan is simply a woman in need of medical care, but when the governments get involved, she becomes a U.S. citizen hit by a bullet in the foreign country of Morocco, and it is that identification that makes her the unsuspecting victim of a terrorist attack. Her female body is victimized and the fact that she is an U.S. citizen in an Arab country post-9/11 results in diplomatic posturing. Governmental involvement only complicates getting aid for Susan. A U.S. government official tells Richard over the phone that they (we assume he means US diplomats) are doing everything they can, but that the incident "is all over the news," insinuating that because of the media attention, securing appropriate aid for the bleeding woman cannot be done quickly because of its political implications. Richard does not care whether the ambulance is Moroccan or from the United States, but the way the media and the governments label the incident makes that difference insurmountable for the U.S. official.

Because the United States labels the event a terrorist attack, and that information is spread globally through the media, we see how the posturing, labeling, and so-called diplomatic offense of the two governments puts all of the film's interconnected characters, especially the young Moroccan boys who have now been labeled terrorists, at risk. As Hassopopoulou notes,

> "all media coverage on the shooting – Moroccan, U.S. and Japanese – lay emphasis on the victim's nationality. Inevitably, the film's underlying discourse becomes politicized – at least on the level of reception. This happens despite the fact that the film tries to evade any overt political associations by adopting the same tactic Hollywood uses to evade ideological clashes: that of personalizing sociopolitical conflicts" (Hassapopoulou 8–9).

Despite the personal melodrama, the vocabulary the film uses to connect the characters and communicate the intensification of the event indicates its attitude about the political logic behind it. Placing the responsibility on the media and government standoff is the critique the film offers of globalization: though there are benefits to increased global interconnections, the way that officials' involvement negatively impacts marginalized people around the world who can too easily be labeled as terrorists, vulnerable, symbolic victims, and illegal aliens.

Through screens and radios transmitting updates about Susan's status and the attempts to track down her shooter, the film tracks the escalation of the global media interest in the event and of the governmental standoff it causes between U.S. and Moroccan officials. Indeed, throughout the film, the links between the characters around the world are communicated through international media outlets that emphasize the individuals' nationality and the political implications of the crisis. Not all of the characters know how they fit into the global schema. In fact, several characters only learn of their national framing through media reports that sensationalize the government posturing over the accidental shooting that is labeled as a terrorist attack. The frames politicize the characters in ways that make them not even recognize each other.

Many of the characters are oblivious to the effects of their actions and the far-reaching repercussions. During the Moroccan family's dinner, the mother asks the father why he came home late. He replies that the road was shut down because of a purported terrorist attack that killed an U.S. woman. The father has no idea how he himself is involved in the incident.

This is portrayed by what is presented as a normal family dinner and his casual assertion that there are no terrorists in the area. These kinds of shots also serve to instruct the viewer on cultural diversity; the family sits low to the ground and eats with their hands. Whether this "instruction" connects the audience with these characters or distances them is debatable.

No, there aren't any terrorists here.

But, the American government was quick to suggest a terrorist link.

Though their father may not be able to fathom that the rifle he bought for his sons that morning was used in the globally-reported incident, the sons exchange knowing, though somewhat incredulous and overwhelmed, glances. While a Moroccan news report on the shooting plays, the camera shows the audience what are supposedly average Moroccans ...

... including these women in the village where Susan is being treated and waiting for assistance approved by the U.S. gov't. Though the news report comes from the movie world, the characters in these shots are not listening to it. A link between them and the incident is constructed by the filmmakers to make the audience feel like they can view Moroccan lifestyles here.

The boys first learn of the consequences of the shot they fired at the bus and the U.S. victim when their father returns home late with news that the road on which he normally returns home was blocked off because of a so-called terrorist attack that is garnering international attention. The father does not suspect the boys' involvement because the possibility of them being involved in an internationally significant event is beyond his purview as a goatherd in rural Morocco. Their inability to think globally, despite their real links to people from other parts of the world, is indicative of the unexpected consequences of globalization, and also marks a critique of the treatment of these underprivileged characters and the depiction of their vulnerability.

Though Chieko is more actively involved in bringing the news reports into the realm of the film, she passively ignores the information. She disinterestedly channel surfs while waiting for her friend to arrive.

Their underprivileged position is not the determining factor that makes them oblivious to their global links, though. Their ignorance is somehow related to their suffering, but even though their socioeconomic status connects to their suffering, it is not to blame. In fact, Chieko, who is the daughter of an apparently wealthy family is also incapable of imagining how she is involved in the media reports that are constantly onscreen in her sections of the film. Most often, it is during the segments that take place in Japan that the film shows us reports on the "terrorist attack." By and large, Chieko ignores the media reports when she encounters them while disinterestedly surfing television channels.

This still strikingly juxtaposes Chieko and Yussef. Both are unwittingly pulled into the global implications of the incident, but the consequences for Yussef are much more dire.

Indicative of the film's deliberate reasons for showing the news reports about the so-called terrorist attack, the other television programs Chieko casually encounters do not have subtitles to translate from Japanese to English for the audience.

As a result, the reports are for the benefit of the audience; they provide updates on how the media is framing the victims and perpetrators according to nationalist frames and anxieties. They offer an initial superficial connection among the storylines, which remarkably privileges the U.S. perspective and further distances Chieko. The fact that not all of the news is translated from the Japanese in subtitles for the audience limit the film's ability to accomplish its goal, as articulated by Hassapopoulou, of

> "offer[ing] U.S. audiences a glimpse of what other parts of the world are like without forcing them out of their comfort zone for too long. Subtitles are there to remind U.S. viewers that 'foreignness' can be made accessible through the wonders of media technology and via relatable characters" (7).

Hassapopoulou suggests that by only translating the television shows Chieko watches that relate to the U.S. woman's shooting, the film focuses on information "integral to the overarching plot" while it "tries to put into perspective how insignificant the shooting is for some of the characters" (8). In doing so, it prevents the audience from connecting with Chieko; moreover, it shows how disconnected

Despite Chieko's disinterest in the news reports on Susan's shooting, she is implicated in the event through her father's rifle. When police officers come to question her father about the rifle, she understandably assumes they came to talk to her about something in her purview. She thinks they have come to investigate her mother's suicide, showing she is focused on concerns closer to home.

Chieko is from the global range of the film.

Chieko is oblivious to the international crises that are the focus of the film's storylines and while she is not victimized by a nationalist frame directly placed upon her body — as Amelia and Susan are — Chieko's vulnerability intensifies as she is pulled into the global context. The film segments filmed in Japan that focus on Chieko feel conspicuously disconnected from the other scenarios for much of the film. They show her struggling to communicate and fit in; she is ostracized from other Japanese youth her age because of her deafness and she does not connect with her father. Though we do not have much information about her past, she is characterized as very self-focused as she struggles to deal with herself, her sexuality, and her mother's recent suicide. Her disinterest in the news reports on Susan's injury and other media she encounters indicates her self-centeredness, but when she is pulled into the global perspective her reactions further confuse her global connections with her natural self-concern. When Japanese policemen come to talk to her father about the rifle he owned that was connected to the shooting of the U.S. tourist in Morocco, Chieko assumes they want to talk about her father's involvement in her mother's death. She, understandably, personalizes their interest in her family because it is the event she focuses on and has influenced her disconnection from normal interaction. She cannot imagine the global context — that the police are simply tracking the "terrorist's" gun that has been the subject of news reports playing in her presence — and so takes their interest in her personally.

The characterization of Chieko's inability to fit in emphasizes her sexuality and vulnerability. Because of her deafness, she is forced to communicate bodily, but she desperately wants to connect with others, so she throws herself at any male who gets even mildly close to her (even the dentist). She invites the younger policeman back to her house. He thinks she wants to talk more about the gun or her mother's death, but she appears before him naked, offering herself sexually to him. He does not know how to respond, so covers her with his overcoat and leaves, but not before she gives him a mysterious note that can be interpreted as a suicide note. His reaction of covering her because he is caught off guard by her vulnerability, because he was primarily interested in her global connections with the "terrorist's" gun symbolically portrays the objectification of bodies when putting them in the sociopolitical context.
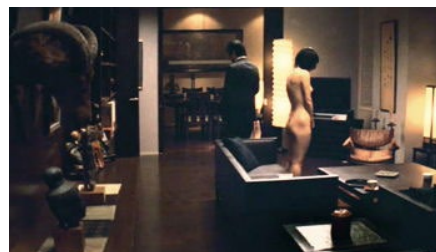
The film portrays Chieko's difficulties communicating as a result of her deafness. She tries to fit in by using her body to connect with others. Here she engages with the police officers in a self-centered way by presenting herself naked to one of them, seeking a sexual encounter. Chieko seeks acceptance and physical comfort by trying to

The officer tries to console Chieko, but in doing so, he rejects physical contact with her and instead covers her with his overcoat. His covering her nakedness in this way shows symbolically how her attempts to understand her place in the world physically are ineffective. All female bodies in the film are objectified and framed by their situation in
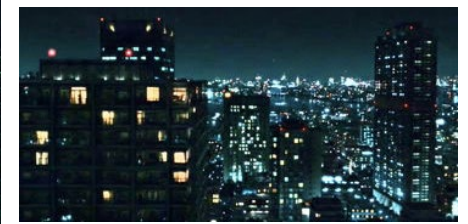
This follows the pattern established throughout the film: the camera continuously objectifies Chieko's body as she tries to communicate with others and deal with her sexuality. The camera focuses on the transgressive spaces where she is trying to obtain physical and sexual interaction with men. This makes the audience either complicit in the objectification of her vulnerable body or made uncomfortable by her vulnerability in the global context. The audience is thereby given the opportunity to think through that discomfort and the reason why the camera is able to cause it. Significant for its relation to the film's purported humanistic message — as well as the way it symbolically matches the victimization and subsequent external framing of female bodies — the film ends with Chieko standing naked on the balcony of her Tokyo high-rise apartment building. Her father finds her there and the two embrace, giving relatively positive narrative closure to the film. As Hassapopoulou notes, the accompanying soundtrack optimistically frames their embrace, and the subsequent zoom out to reframe the two in an aerial shot of Tokyo dissolves the personal tensions on which the film focused:

> "the socio-political tension may still linger in the viewer's mind, but the zoom out makes it easier for the viewers to detach themselves from the film's content" (Hassapopoulou 17).

The closure offered by the father's embrace of Chieko's vulnerable body does not resolve her inability to understand the global context that drew her to such an extreme; rather, it literally and figuratively covers her exposed global objectification. Chieko's marginalization contradicts her military and economic global connection through her father's gun. Resolving the film with a simple, though overdetermined, paternal enclosure symbolically reinforces the way the other victimized female bodies in the film are treated. Though Chieko's nationality does not specifically matter, she is the exception that proves the rule: by being pulled into the global context unwittingly, her vulnerability magnifies to the extent that she is reduced to extreme measures to try to understand the meaning of her body in this new context.

The personal inflections of the globally interconnected storylines offer the film's viewers a privileged perspective of the details and broad landscape of the effects of globalization. The film's navigation of these two registers gives insight into the treatment of individuals and objects by the policies that advance such global interconnections. The logic that facilitates jumping back and forth between personalized details and global perspectives allows us to see how individuals — in *Babel*, feminized victims — are destructively framed by the sociopolitical schema. Analogous to the way the final shots of Chieko's naked body being embraced by her father disappear in the aerial shot of the Tokyo landscape offer the viewer a privileged amount of closure, recall that Amelia's travails in the desert border geography are accompanied by brilliant shots of the landscape and that Susan's rescue is facilitated by a high-flying helicopter from which we see views of the Moroccan countryside. These views give the viewer distance from the personal strife of the characters; paradoxically, that strife deliberately pulled the audience in only to be left behind in the end.

Nonetheless, the vulnerable female bodies in *Babel* signify more than the sites on which the plot develops; they metonymically represent the consequences of the disjunction between geographic territory and cultural identity caused by neoliberal globalization policies. The film's participation in the "network narrative" trend also indicates that it follows the model of having "small stories" with broad implications. The global range of the characters also follows the recent pattern in cinema worldwide to depict the effect when "protagonists of films move or are moved out of the space or territory that they know, whose values they ascribe to

Perhaps most striking in their forced disconnection from the characters, the last shots of the Moroccan brothers are of the older brother being carried down the hill lifeless after the younger brother surrenders to the police, asking them to blame him, not his brother, for the shooting.

Treating the young boy like a terrorist seems also to shock the police officers who have been searching for him and now shoot at him.

Robert offers the Moroccan tourist guide money to thank him for helping him and Susan, but the Moroccan declines, accepting a hug and a simple expression of gratitude instead.

and from which their subjectivities are constructed." As presented by Caitlin Manning and Julie Shackford-Bradley,

> "these characters represent larger ideologies or cultural forces, their deterritorialization within small stories becomes a vehicle for understanding what happens when ideologies and other cultural constructs are moved from their origins into new spaces, a process that globalization has accelerated" (Manning and Shackford-Bradley 37).

Framing the female bodies nationalistically — or following sociopolitical anxieties in the global context even when the characters do not leave their territory — reveals the extent to which the globalization processes have complicated interaction across borders. With Manning and Shackford-Bradley's insight, we see that the feminized characters and the duress they undergo are representative of the changes in cultural processes that have accompanied globalization.

The way the film connects the characters and the storylines reveals further the implications of what the film reveals about how cultural processes have been affected by globalization. In particular, the storylines are connected and impelled by the rifle and by the media reports about the shooting in Morocco. While the media reports indicate the denigrating nationalistic framing of the shooting, its perpetrator, and its victim, it also functions as a connector among the different fragments. Additionally, the way each woman connects across borders and is treated contrasts significantly with the gun's role in the film. The gun's status as a commodity that can move across borders differs from the nationalistic limitations placed on the female characters by the media and the government officials who interact with those victims. Moreover, when we realize the broader, symbolic implications of the female characters as representatives of culture and cultural processes, we see that the gun as commodity — despite its literal destructive potential — is treated preferentially by the policies that facilitate globalization.

The disjunctive segues of *Babel* as cultural representative and commodity

In the context of the film industry, which creates products that are divergently considered to be commodities and cultural representatives, the implications of the contrasting treatment of the gun and the female characters are brought into an even more significant perspective. Through the syntactical connections among the storylines, we see the potential for the film to represent its own position in the globally-interconnected world. By portraying victimized female bodies framed by nationalist and media biases, it raises concerns about films' categorization as cultural representatives or commodities with national or international labels. Moreover, the syntax of the connections and differences established by the film deconstruct those categories.

Babel's Hollywood funding and distribution is not necessarily incompatible with the fact that it was made under a Mexican director. Rather, its global links are

characteristic of the majority of Hollywood films and meet neoliberal policies' (like NAFTA's) ideals of cross-border corporate collaboration. The film embodies the complications of cultural products' relation to national identity in the global era. Like the gun, the film legally crosses national borders, but significantly the most negative consequences rest on the underprivileged like Amelia and the Moroccan brothers or helpless females like Susan. Amelia's life is completely destroyed as punishment for trying to cross the border illegally — and in retaliation for working and building a life in the United States. Her immobility stands in stark contrast to the global travels and influence of the film's director and creative staff, who are also Mexican. However, though the film production (its capital and its directors) moved across borders, most of the individual laborers are immobile and must seek their livelihoods from whatever jobs are available in their locale. In this register, the film's economic aspects butt up against its cultural representations. The film connects these two registers: commodity — like the gun — and symbolic representative of culture — like Amelia. And within the film these two registers conflict most powerfully.

Ultimately, *Babel*'s movement is more akin to the gun's movement across borders than Amelia's. However, by showing Amelia's treatment as illogical and unfair, the film has critical potential for showing what happens to cultural representatives when they are separated from their natural territory and labeled as illegal because of it. However, the film still perpetuates the logic that the underprivileged are to blame when their decisions negatively impact the upper class, and in this way the film destructively reinforces stereotypes. Just as the camera's perspective allows its connection with Amelia to be mediated by the border official's viewpoint, stripping Amelia of her past contextualization, underprivileged characters throughout the film are reduced to their nationality and legal status within the territory they occupy.

The final shots of Amelia are similarly distancing. After she is deported, we see her hugging her son and crying in a relative close up ...

... but we no longer hear diegetic sound from her world.

For example, following the unfavorable close-ups of Amelia from the perspective of the border official, the film does not allow the audience to connect with Amelia again. Instead, we see her from a distance after she has been deported back to Mexico and her son comes to pick her up. Extradiegetic music plays, so the audience has been forcibly disconnected from her world. In this indication of what the future holds for Amelia, the audience's connection to her is reduced to her emotions; it calls upon the empathy the film has been building in the audience only to establish distance from the character anew. In a film about learning to listen in order to understand, our last encounters with central characters are significantly mediated by music and longer shots than the typical close-ups.[7] [open endnotes

] With this distance, the film reports the consequences of Amelia's encounter with the border, indicates her future sadness, and then the plot moves on.

Importantly, the shot of Amelia embracing her son while sobbing cuts to a scene of Robert getting on the helicopter that has finally arrived to take Susan to a U.S.-approved hospital. With the extradiegetic music still playing, he tries to give money to the Moroccan guide who has tried to help the tourists throughout the ordeal. The guide refuses the money, showing that he helped Robert and Susan out of genuine concern for their well-being. Robert's inability to recognize altruism in his third-world assistant, but a trait he apparently appreciates with the guide's refusal of remuneration, makes a complicated juxtaposition with Amelia's final dejection. [8] The scenes are connected by the extradiegetic music, but what they communicate about the hierarchical relations between the characters because of their national provenance and socioeconomic statuses might contrast with the utopian impulses of the film's humanism. These types of juxtapositions are found throughout the film and further indicate how the logic of the film reveals its relation to the sociopolitical implications of global interconnections it uses as a backdrop.

The shot of the Moroccan brothers running to hide after they realize one of them has shot the bus jumps to ...

... Mike running to hide during a game of hide-and-seek with Amelia and his sister. Though the shots are matched visually, a thematic contrast is established. The different reasons the children hide show vastly different lifestyles and privileges.

The scene of Santiago killing the chickens by wringing their necks in front of the children jumps to an image of...

... Susan lying on the floor of the bus bleeding from her wound. Underprivileged characters have the power to cause the shock on the mother and son's faces, but they suffer dire consequences for jeopardizing the privileged characters' happy ending.

The patterns of *Babel*'s transitions between the storylines complicate the film's attitude about globalization and the borders rendered permeable, especially as

these transitions contrast the logic of the narrative connections established by the gun, personal relationships, and media and police reports. There are moments when the transitions between scenes are logical segues, but often the jumps are jarring and emphasize discontinuity between the segments. The soundbridge discussed above between the last scene of Amelia and the last exchange between Robert and the tour guide is a good example; it blends tense, ethnic music into a high-pitched ambulance siren and helicopter coming to save Susan. By paying attention to the transitions between shots, we see that

> "the meaning of each sequence or 'stanza' is conditioned [by the] juxtaposition achieved through *Babel*'s montage" (Pellicer 244).

Other examples include the juxtaposition of a shot of the Moroccan children running to hide after one of them has shot the bus, which is followed immediately by Mike running to hide in a game of hide-and-seek with Amelia. Also illustrative of these disjunctive, shocking parallels is the jump from Amelia's nephew killing a hen at the wedding by twisting its neck to an image of Susan laying on the floor of the bus bleeding from her shot wound. The links between these shots are not causal, but their aesthetic and thematic connections seem to stress the similarities between the stories. In that way the film attempts to suggest that the connections are deep, even though the logic that connects them evinces the uneven hierarchies perpetuated by the globalization processes the film portrays. The jump from the Mexican killing the chicken to the U.S. woman bleeding on a dirty bus floor would imply savage power for the Mexican and victimization for the woman, but the narrative works to correct this upside-down hierarchy to punish the Mexican by rendering him invisible and safeguarding the U.S. woman through force and government posturing. The dynamics between the characters as victims or as perpetrators of violence are further complicated by the visual logic's propensity to promulgate stereotypes.

The camera's angles and focus objectify Chieko's body by showing it in parts, often emphasizing her bare legs. Though Chieko seems to want to be treated as a sexual object ...

... she is really seeking acceptance and understanding from a group of people she can only communicate with bodily.

Though González Iñárritu optimistically suggests the links among the storylines emphasize commonalities of human suffering, the shocking jump cuts and compromising depictions of characters treated as distinctly "other" perpetuate stereotypes. In addition to the objectification of Chieko's body from a variety of perspectives, the scenes of the younger Moroccan brother masturbating shortly after he is shown spying on his sister while she undresses takes advantage of the underprivileged characters (as well as the non-professional actors). These and other scenes evince the privileged perspective the film affords the audience. Shaw also suggests that despite efforts to overcome the distance created by cinematic and tourist voyeurism,

> "*Babel* ultimately relies on images of otherness as familiar to the tourist as to the film spectator" (Shaw 22).

What makes *Babel'*s inability to overcome that distancing most significant is the film's own global connections.

Babel's Mexican frames

Even though the "three amigos" directors do not always make films that are about or take place in Mexico, their nationality is emphasized to establish a connection among them and to make statements about the trends in cinema classified as "Mexican."

Despite the film's Hollywood provenance, *Babel* purports to be part of a blossoming world cinema.[9] [open endotes in new window] But the position the camera takes to depict underprivileged characters reinforces a Hollywood perspective. For example, when the U.S. border official questions Amelia, the camera takes his perspective, focusing on her illegal status and ignoring her comfortable life in San Diego, despite the fact that the director and most of the film's creative staff are Mexican. Though *Babel* ostensibly shows the negative consequences of the way neoliberal policies, like NAFTA, preferentially treat commodities over individuals and U.S. citizens above all others through depicting the consequences of different types of movement across borders, the way the film reinforces national labels and stereotypes contradicts that critique. The film's perpetuation of the typical Hollywood happy-ending for the U.S. citizens at the expense of the underprivileged, including a Mexican, seems paradoxical when considering the Mexican creative staff. Especially after NAFTA, because the film navigates the conflicts between how to treat commodities and cultural products, the national label given to it has distinct implications for its interpretation and the facility with which it crosses borders and is consumed globally.

Even though the global links depicted in the film and found in its production details are common for global Hollywood, many still pay attention to the director's nationality to characterize the film. Regardless of whether the director is cognizant of the film's analogies to the storylines, the film's syntax and the logic scholars use when characterizing the film are indicative of the global landscape — of the film industry and the many registers of global exchange. I have argued that from *Babel*, we learn the consequence of national labels in the global era, especially in the movement of commodities and cultural representatives, represented in the film by the gun and Amelia, respectively. So when it comes to thinking about the film's national origin, we know the significance of such a question, especially because of the implications of stereotypes and depictions of social inequality. The fact that the film has connections to multiple nations, in its funding, creative staff, and filming locations is characteristic of global films, but that the film and globalizing policies like NAFTA emphasize the determination of national origin so rigorously encourages us to think through the connection between the film and its national origin, or lack thereof.

This is especially important in the case of the Mexican film industry, which many argue has been in decline since NAFTA, despite the success of globally-distributed, profitable films from Mexican filmmakers, which exhibit a different complication of the relations

Babel, Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth* [El laberinto del fauno], and Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* have little in common, but they are linked because they were released in 2006 by Mexican directors. Their success has been said to indicate a rekindling of Mexican cinema. However, it could also indicate that Hollywood is more "global" than ever and follows the patterns of neoliberal free trade.

between national geographic territory and cultural identity. Several film critics have suggested that the success of such films as González Iñárritu's *Babel*, Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth* [*El laberinto del fauno*], and Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men*, which were all released in 2006, piqued the latest wave of interest in Mexican cinema (see, for example, O'Boyle).[10] But is there anything specifically "Mexican" about these films beyond their directors' nationalities? A Hollywood corporation funded each of the three films and only *Babel* was filmed (but only partially) in Mexico. As a result, the use of the Mexican national adjective for these films, while complicated, indicates an interest in understanding what these pairings mean for Mexico and Hollywood. This combination indicates one example of how the "concepts of nation, people, and identity" have been redefined with the "deterritorialization of symbolic processes," whih García Canclini argues is caused by globalization policies like NAFTA (*Hybrid Cultures* 10).

On one hand, the Mexican directors' Hollywood success makes their criticism of the government and distributors for stifling the Mexican film industry seem duplicitous (see O'Boyle). On the other hand, their use of Hollywood funding indicates that they have been able to overcome the obstacles put in place with NAFTA that hinder the Mexican film industry. In some ways, they have had to embrace the open market policies of globalization to succeed internationally. Directors have to do this in order to have the freedom to make widely distributed films. As García Canclini suggests, though artists often express dissent against neoliberal policies, their ability to

> "go on filming or distributing pictures, videos, and books relevant to local cultures depends on the degree of control that they secure within the most advanced networks of transnational communications" (García Canclini 101).

González Iñárritu, Del Toro, and Cuarón have effectively secured the control García Canclini talks about by receiving Hollywood's support and producing films that recoup their production costs. For example, in an article regarding a contract Alfonso Cuarón signed with Warner Brothers and Warner International to produce films in Mexico and around the world, Cuarón is quoted saying: "The freedom I've been given is impressive" (Ciuk, n.p.). Even though Cuarón emphasizes that the contract gave him "a lot of creative independence in local productions," the directors' control is not predicated on any desire to produce films relevant to Mexico. Rather, the directors secure funding because of the commercial success of their films. So, what I wish to interrogate here is whether looking for a connection between these films and a cultural sense of Mexico is justified.

In scholarship considering the Mexican nationality of such films, there are two prevalent trends. One is to consider how the Hollywood budgets of films by Mexican directors are emblematic of the shifts encouraged by NAFTA in relation to the traditional unity of national territory and culture. This trend convincingly demonstrates the prevalence of NAFTA's influential ideology (see Menne, Baer and Long, and Saldaña-Portillo). Scholarship on films by these Mexican directors also frequently looks deliberately for Mexican characteristics,

even though such films do not necessarily have any thematic or plot connection to Mexican territory or culture. Both trends indicate the complexity of how territory and culture are being remapped in the era of globalization, but I focus below on the latter to show how *Babel*'s depiction of the divergent treatment of commodities and individuals collides when considering the global context of the film industry.

Several scholars present the specifically "Mexican" characteristics of the globally successful, often Hollywood-funded, films by Mexican filmmakers. They often suggest the filmmakers use Mexican culture furtively even as they secure future financing from U.S.-based Hollywood corporations.[11] A striking example is how Juan Pellicer identifies aspects of *Babel*'s narrative and cinematography that seem Mexican because of their resemblance to Mexico's ancient cultures' understanding of time and space. For him, in *Babel*, "time is presented in a circular way and events are repeated from different perspectives" and that "circular design fits in particular Mexican traditions, especially those regarding circular time" (Pellicer 247). He also makes a link to the Mexican artistic movement of *muralismo*, suggesting that *Babel*'s attempt to piece together different story threads is akin to the murals'

> "historic perspective by depicting different historic events and peoples [...] all sharing the same instant, all contemporaries of each other" (248).

These connections, though interesting, require Pellicer to stretch his arguments merely for the sake of suggesting a link between aspects of the film and Mexican history and culture.[12]

Further proof of the unsustainability of this stretch is the fact that in the end, Pellicer moves away from arguing for the film's formal Mexican qualities. Instead, he says that *Babel* is "formally a U.S. production." Nevertheless, he does emphasize that because its creative staff is Mexican, it is

> "a work of art achieved in the boundaries where two different cultures meet. But it is also a work of art depicting prejudices that, rather than different languages, provoke mis-readings and prevent understanding among people otherwise as close to each other as human beings can be" (Pellicer 248).

The way that Pellicer reads the film to emblematize the stereotypically highlighted aspects of Mexican culture only to disregard them subsequently for a different national label is symptomatic of the very type of misreadings and misunderstandings that Pellicer articulates as a theme of the film, especially because of the power dynamic it reveals between the United States and Mexico. Pellicer's analysis is an extreme example of the characteristic of post-NAFTA film criticism, where the critic looks for the local aspects of the cultural product at the same time as acknowledging the global forces' effects in reconfiguring relations between individuals, goods, territories, and national frames. Especially in this case, the constant desire to find the local in the global commodity is reductive and denigrating to Mexican culture. It justifies the assumption that a modern Mexican would always be referring to

the pre-historic tradition, as if Mexico has not progressed or modernized.[13]

Additionally, though Pellicer offers an interesting formalist analysis of the film, especially its montage patterns, such editing techniques also characterize contemporary Hollywood films. In Bordwell's discussion of *Babel*, he not only places it firmly in the global aesthetic trend of network narratives, but he also suggests it is unified with a technical fetishization and an ability to travel the world doing location-specific shooting. As chronicled in Rachael Bosley's article on *Babel* in the November 2006 *American Cinematographer*, González Iñárritu and cinematographer Rodrigo Prieto deliberately distinguished different story threads through color, grain, film stock, film gauge, lab processing, and even aspect ratio. The segments that take place in the "third world" are on grainier film stock with less vibrant colors. Bordwell characterizes these types of decisions within a current

> "tendency of contemporary American filmmakers to develop subtle, maybe unnoticeable patterns of technique that run alongside the film's story" (2).

Interestingly, some have interpreted the wedding scenes in Mexico to be authentic, drawing on the director's nationality for corroboration, while others find them to be disturbingly stereotypical, also referencing the Mexican citizenship of the filmmakers.

That Bordwell, a trained cinephile, "could spot almost none of this finesse on the screen" suggests the superficiality of the attempt to differentiate the storylines stereotypically (Bordwell 3). Instead, it suggests that González Iñárritu and Prieto fetishize the technology and mobility they have access to because of their big budget and Hollywood support. Their decisions about how to differentiate the storylines show that the filmmakers were more concerned with documenting difference, or at least calling attention to perceptions of difference, and metaphorically showing the effects of being underprivileged than in trying to encourage audiences to look beyond differences to bring together the global population. Even though they privilege difference, because it is facilitated by the global mobility and expensive technology afforded by the big Hollywood budget, Bordwell argues "that Hollywood is as committed to an aesthetic of unity as it ever was — maybe even more committed" (3).[14] The emphasis on diversity paradoxically indicates a uniform treatment of subject matter that can only be achieved from the privileged position of Hollywood funding.

The wedding scenes feature *norteño* music, dusty roads, and lots of people, food, and alcohol, stereotypes about Mexican culture.

This paradox is emblematic of the way that *Babel* and other global network narratives commodify difference through depicting global interconnections. These "international" cinemas practice neoliberal ideology to generate as much revenue as possible. Additionally, Hollywood funding affects the films of the Mexican directors: the Hollywood budget allows for a fetishization of technology that influences the aesthetic decisions about how and what stories to tell in the films. While not only Mexican directors make such films, it shows that Hollywood investments result in a particular type of product — ones polished with evidence of global mobility that are also marketed and distributed in such a way practically to guarantee their global success.

And yet, scholars still look to the director's nationality for a sense of authenticity. For example, Hassapapoulou argues that audiences who are aware of the director's Mexican nationality see that the scenes that take place in Mexico, including the wedding scene, are "more culturally

When Amelia, Mike, and Debbie cross into Mexico, the children are wide-eyed and wonder if Mexico meets the stereotypes their mother has used to describe their southern neighbors. ...

... The images the filmmakers put onscreen emphasize bright colors, street food, and religious imagery, supporting the stereotypes by making Mexico seem immediately very different from the United States.

authentic/ accurate than other parts of the film" because the director felt a "representational burden" to "represent (the real) Mexico" (Hassapopoulou 14). Hassapopoulou goes on to suggest that "in light of this, the wedding scenes have a richer sense of traditionalism and cultural awareness" (14). However, others, see those scenes to be largely stereotypical — for example, Shaw argues that the film stereotypically shows

> "Mexico [to be] rural and poor, replete with dusty tracks and a drunken wedding with traditional norteño music" (Shaw 21).[15]

Other scenes of the Mexican characters, especially those featuring Amelia's nephew, exoticize Mexican culture and make it seem dangerous and reckless. The stereotypes are not exclusively the responsibility of the Mexican director, but the emphasis on the director's nationality frames the film and its creative staff in a way similar to the way the female victims are framed — with destructive consequences in the plot of the film. Even though the film depicts universal suffering and posits a world village, the fact that we are still focusing on national labels and national stereotypes proves that even in the global era, we need to deliberately address the hierarchies perpetuated by the global interconnections.

Through the depiction of the negative consequences of national framing and the uneven logic of border crossing, the film warns against relying on national labels to determine the acceptability of commodities and individuals in certain territories, especially in their exchange with others. Thus, while there may not be anything particularly Mexican about *Babel*, it dramatizes its own circumstances, which are indicative of the ubiquity of globalization and the policies enacted to benefit capital-seeking corporations. As a result, *Babel* exemplifies the benefits and dangers of the way globalization policies — neoliberal free trade in particular — suggest the permeability of borders while also reinforcing them. Though the production of the film was successfully global, the storyline depicts the perils of cross-border interaction, especially for the underprivileged. While the film harmfully stereotypes characters in a way that also reflects the limitations of global cultural exchange, its commentary on the effects of labeling individuals and commodities by their nationality illustrates the divisions between territory and culture characteristic of the global era. *Babel* portrays the end results of deterritorializing cultural representatives and commodities, which, by extension, are analogues for the film industry's circumstances in the global, neoliberal landscape in which it operates.

Go to Notes page

Notes

1. Marina Hassapopoulou quotes from several interviews in which González Iñárritu claims that he did not want to emphasize a political agenda in the film, but rather focus on human interactions (see Hassapopoulou 12). [return to page 1]

2. See also Baer and Long.

3. According to "*Babel*," boxofficemojo.com, (accessed May 5, 2009). http://boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=babel.htm
The estimated budget comes from "*Babel*," Internet Movie DataBase, (accessed May 5, 2009).
http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0449467/

4. Chuck Kleinhans recently published an article in *Jump Cut* on the "creative industries" in the current recession. While he shows that the term "culture industries" is only really used in academic circles anymore, he argues that as capitalist commodities, cultural products are imbricated in the point of capitalism ("expanding and maximizing capital itself"); moreover, the

> "larger forces of neoliberalism, such as speedup and outsourcing even 'creative' work overseas, are more decisive in shaping the actual creative work climate and the possibilities that individual face as employees than the wispy utopianism of turning on the creative faucet to get a stream of new jobs, opportunities, and adventures" (3).

5. This is one of the two fatal flaws of the film, according to Mexican filmmaker, José Luis Pardo. In an interview with the author in Tijuana, MX in May 2011, Sr. Pardo argued that it was unconscionable for González Iñárritu to suggest that someone from the border would drive through the barricades in the way Santiago does.

6. The paradoxes and xenophobia of this term further emphasizes the complications between territories and national categories. Thought it probably doesn't need a definition, here it means that Amelia is a Mexican citizen living and working in the US without permission.

7. The film's tagline is: "If you want to be understood, listen." [return to page 3]

8. Shaw suggests this scene evinces the director's optimism about worldwide

collaboration (20).

9. Shaw chronicles this especially well. []

10. Like O'Boyle, Perla Ciuk suggests that the success of films like *Y tu mamá también* and *Amores perros* "has done a lot to raise international awareness of Mexican cinema." Again, it is important to keep questioning what these authors are referring to in talking about "Mexican cinema." Ciuk goes on to quote Cuarón and suggest that he "cites a different factor" to understand the success of these films:

> "'Mexican movies accept reality, embrace and express it, and the contact they make with the public is harsh'" (Ciuk).

Here is another definition of what is special about Mexican cinema that makes it globally successful even in being locally grounded. The implication of the way Mexican films depict reality and make contact with the public implies, even though vaguely, a not-only Mexican audience and an attempt to move beyond the normal limitations set on film — as affected by globalization forces through increasingly permeable borders for commodities, faster technology, and media.

11. For example, Cuarón directed the 2004 installment of the *Harry Potter* series(*Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*), which Jeffrey Menne asserts,

- "allowed him to faintly stamp this global product with Mexican culture as well as gain production leverage for future enterprises" (87); further,
- "much was made in the Harry Potter chatrooms of Cuarón's inclusion of Day of the Dead sugar skeletons and the eagle and serpent of the Mexican flag as incidental props, as though he had signed the film with his heritage" (Menne 92, endnote 62).

12. Dolores Tierney also situates the Hollywood films in a Mexican national cinema.

13. In fact, it is precisely this type of statement about Mexico's need to modernize or inability to modernize on its own that echoes the NAFTA negotiations and justification. The lack of the acknowledgement that Mexico has modernized, or the emphasis on the pre-Colonial tradition is similar to arguments made by Jaime Serra Puche and Rafael Tovar y de Teresa, and even President Carlos Salinas about the importance of NAFTA in Mexico's modernization process. On the other hand, and somewhat paradoxically, in conversations about the vitality of Mexican culture these same politicians and even author Carlos Fuentes suggest that because Mexican culture is so old, there is no way that a culture as young as U.S. culture can trample it. Again, the basic, and fallacious, assumption is that Mexican culture has essentially remained constant and committed to the ideas of pre-Colombian times, even in the face of acknowledged hybridization.

14. This aesthetic of unity, in the face of emphasizing difference (even if only technologically) resonates with Hardt and Negri discussion in *Empire* of

globalization's creation of a "regime of production of identity and difference," which encourages difference and the multiplicity of products, but may actually create false desire.

15. I interviewed film workers in Tijuana, Mexico in May 2011. Without exception, they expressed dislike for *Babel* because of the stereotypical Mexican wedding scene. It should be noted that they disliked the scene even more because it came from a Mexican creative staff. Their focus on the director's nationality also indicates that even though we are talking more and more about global commodities, we are still forced to think about national labels.

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Looking back on Iraq: winning American hearts and minds

by Patricia Ventura

The U.S. embassy in Baghdad is the world's largest embassy.

A Gunner on patrol in the formerly upscale Adhamiya district of Baghdad.

Cops promotes a "law-and-order ideology."

The last of the combat troops was pulled out of Iraq in December 2011, marking the end of a nearly nine-year war with little fanfare or sentiment or even press coverage. But rather than forgetting Iraq and moving on as U.S. political leaders and media have done, this is precisely the time to look back on the Iraq War, especially as neoconservatives and other hawks try to drum up a case for war with Iraq's neighbor, Iran. This paper aims to put contemporary U.S. war in a larger context to understand how the Iraq War was promoted in the United States. For the war in Iraq actually stands as an object lesson for how to win support for U.S. combat operations in our era of neoliberal capitalism, which integrates war into a prosaic corporate Americana.

I analyze the practicalities of contemporary U.S. war, including how troops are trained, supported by contractors, and represented in dominant culture. These practicalities are aimed as much toward producing fighters who win wars as insuring U.S. support of foreign and economic policy as well as the military-industrial complex.

Before beginning this exploration, it is important to recognize the Iraq War as a tragic debacle. Well over 100,000 Iraqis died, and some estimates actually put the death toll over 500,000. U.S. military fatalities reached almost 4500. Contractors are not included in that count and the number of their fatalities is not accurately known. Uncertainties about the monetary costs are even harder to break through, but noted economists Joseph Stiglitz and Linda Bilmes estimate that the war's cost to the United States, including long-term expenses and losses, will total $3 trillion — which, it goes without saying, is substantially higher than the $50-60 billion the Bush Administration estimated. The cost of the destruction of Iraq's infrastructure cannot be definitively determined. The lasting impact is also hard to determine; for the United States, what remains structurally is a U.S. Embassy that is the world's largest building complex of its kind. Tellingly, at war's end it was guarded by 200 service personnel, who were themselves supported by an army of thousands of contractors all holed up in what is basically a fortress.

Gunner Palace often resembles an episode of *Cops*.

A "suspected bomb maker" expresses anger over the invasion of his house and his treatment upon arrest.

Wilf: the only Gunner fully personalized in *Gunner Palace*.

Barely recognized in the U.S. media, the situation in the embassy embodies the war itself — a massively expensive operation enabled by contractors whose engagement reduces U.S. troop involvement, thereby skirting public scrutiny and media coverage. Thus, the war that started as a spectacular twenty-four-hour news event ended as a back-page story of a backwater conflict.

The Iraq War had in its last years become widely known as a quagmire, a common description used to connect it to Vietnam — the U.S. conflict that has become synonymous with the term "quagmire." Indeed the Vietnam War shaped U.S. understanding of war until Operation Iraqi Freedom. Responding to Vietnam, dominant culture has fetishized the fighters as a band of brothers, an image that works to gain support for the constant militarism required to maintain U.S. neoliberal capitalism. However, this fetishization is only possible through two strategies, both characteristic of the contemporary era:

- privatization (that brings private industry into areas previously dominated by the public sector) and
- governing through freedom (redefining and reinscribing individual freedom so that it becomes a means by which people's choices are controlled).

These strategies work to distract the public and stifle debate about the human costs of war while significantly increasing the financial costs. I will show that U.S. war today depends on diverting attention away from the reasons for the war and redirecting attention to the U.S. troops who fight it.

Gunner Palace

Cinematically, the war has been represented by U.S.-based filmmakers through dramatic fiction films such as *In the Valley of Elah, Green Zone,* and *The Hurt Locker* as well as documentaries covering a variety of aspects of the war including the troops in combat (such as *Occupation: Dreamland, The War Tapes*), the impact on the people of Iraq (*Iraq in Fragments, My Country, My Country*), and U.S. political implications (*No End in Sight, Iraq for Sale*) to take some key examples. But here I will use Petra Epperlein and Michael Tucker's *Gunner Palace* (2004), the first theatrically released documentary about U.S. troops in combat in Iraq, as a touchstone for the larger exploration of how war is promoted in the United States and how dominant U.S. culture positions war and service personnel.

The film encapsulates the posture toward the troops and the Iraqi people that enabled neoconservatives to launch the war in the first place—not because the film is a right-wing propaganda piece but precisely because it is not. The film aims to present the troops objectively without comment about the legitimacy or reasons for the war itself. But, as I show, presenting the troops outside of that context actually works to reinforce a pro-war message. I will contrast the film with two other early Iraq War documentaries *Control Room* (2004) and *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), but *Gunner Palace* is central to this analysis because it best reflects the ideology and rationality by which war is sold to the U.S. people.

Part of *Gunner Palace*'s appeal lies in watching the surreality of GIs partying in the middle of a warzone.

Gunner Palace integrates multiple documentary modes.

Some interviews are set in a black frame to offer a perspective on the narrative, producing an effect analogous to the confessionals on MTV's *Real World*.

Gunner Palace follows the men and women of the U.S. Army's 2/3 Field Artillery (the *gunners* of the film's title) who take up residence in one of Uday Hussein's now-bombed-out palaces (the *palace* part of the title). As a veteran himself, filmmaker and voiceover narrator Michael Tucker was in a different position than many people in media industries who covered the war at the time. This position made his film's neutrality on the war—whatever that means in relation to combat coverage—a privilege not generally allowed the diverse media covering the war in its earliest years. Indeed, given the barrage of pro-war propaganda coming from the mainstream U.S. media at the time the film was released, this soldier's-eye view came across as quite an achievement in the eyes of many reviewers, even anti-war progressives such as Frank Rich of the *New York Times* who called the film "a true tribute to the American troops in Iraq" and scholar Cynthia Fuchs who judged it "remarkable" in a review for *PopMatters*. These reviewers saw the film's capturing of the troops' words and feelings as an achievement and even as a critique of the war itself. A real achievement, of course, would have been to make an unequivocal critique by taking an unambiguous stand against the war.

What stands out about *Gunner Palace*, beyond its timely release as the first documentary following the troops in combat in Iraq, is that visually and thematically it feels like an episode of the long-running Fox reality TV show, *Cops*. This similarity between the two texts is deeply telling. *Gunner Palace* draws from the same selection of representational techniques that are essential to creating the reality effect in *Cops* including

- ride-alongs in which civilians are given apparent insider access,
- hand-held camera,
- night-time recording,
- low-resolution footage,
- close-ups on arrestees being pinned,
- some type of car crash,
- the irrelevance of establishing shots,
- alarming diegetic sounds such as the barking of commands to "get down" or "shut up," and
- the clear disparities between the arrested and the arresters in weaponry, clothing, and level of preparedness.

These features function in *Gunner Palace* as they do in *Cops*. In both cases, what the filmed spectacle lacks in complexity, it overcompensates for in "law-and-order ideology" — the idea that "society is seen to be in decline or crisis because of spiraling crime, specifically violent street crime of the underclasses" (Doyle 96). The solution this ideology offers to the alleged problem of the underclasses is tougher law enforcement. We don't need civil rights; we just need more cops!

Fahrenheit 9/11 portrays the sorrow of Lila Lipscomb whose son died in combat in Iraq.

One of the Gunners' nighttime raids was on "#89," a former director of a chemical weapons facility.

Troops enter #89's house.

In an act of apparent kindness, the troops allow

"Due process and civil rights are part of the problem, because all right-thinking people know [the arrested] are guilty" (Doyle 97).

The ideology has no room for consideration of structural causes of crime such as unemployment or poverty, although it does mobilize "systems of meaning that construct people as us and them" (Doyle 97).

Translating law-and-order ideology onto the small screen dictates that audiences only see the officers' perspective; the camera only follows them. But surprisingly these cops are not really differentiated. The identities of the officers are as irrelevant to the action as the identities of the presumed criminals. So too, the location of the officers and even the year in which an episode was filmed turn out to be fairly irrelevant. Part of the success of the *Cops* formula is that reruns are just not a problem since there is no significant historical or narrative development. The names and locations change to lend a sense of variety, but the stories and characters are the same:. The officers are undifferentiated heroes and the arrested are faceless criminals who deserve to be carted off to jail.

The Iraq War shows that this law-and-order ideology lends itself as easily to a suspension of the Geneva Conventions as to a suspension of Constitutional rights. Representations such as *Cops* and *Gunner Palace* help promote this ideology because in them we only see the viewpoint of the cops and U.S. soldiers on the "front lines." We do not really get to know these figures in any substantive way. We understand their opposition even less. In *Gunner Palace*, with the exception of one Gunner named Wilf, who gets more screen time than the others because he provides comic relief and diegetic rock-and-roll guitar playing, the soldiers are interchangeable. We just learn in vague terms that they are brave and professional.

These vague presentations relate as much to the film's style as content. Using Bill Nichols' schema for analyzing documentary form, we can say *Gunner Palace* utilizes a great number of modes. Tucker's voiceover might seem to make the film expository, a mode characterized by reliance on authoritative narration to make an argument that the images serve to illustrate. But *Gunner Palace's* voice-over is in no way a voice-of-God commentary, unless God is also very confused about the events around him. The centrality of the profilmic events resembles the style of observational documentaries in that the filmmakers are recording experiences as they occur without controlling what is happening. But observational documentaries try to hide the presence of the filmmakers, while Tucker's presence is all over the film. He narrates it in first person, and his voice is even audible asking questions, even though he does not appear on camera. The film is not in the participatory mode of, say, a Michael Moore documentary, but like Moore's work, *Gunner Palace* does rely on interviews that highlight the centrality of individual experience. Some of the interview segments are even cropped and placed inside a small frame on screen so as to set the interview apart from the action. In a way, this stylistic

"#89" to comb his hair before taking him away to an unknown fate.

Sometimes the arrested do not resist.

Part of the *Cops* formula involves reveling in the humiliation of the decontextualized "bad guys."

Here the *Cops*-style humiliation appears in the form of a suspected insurgent financier taken into custody in his bare feet and nightgown.

device is reminiscent of the confessionals on MTV's *Real World* where the housemates take time out from the action to go to a private space to comment on their lives and the events around them. In *Gunner Palace*, the interviews challenge the audience to feel for the soldiers while the soldiers themselves explicitly challenge the audience to remember them.

Ultimately, this combination of modes hints at something more than the film's style. For Fuchs,

> "*Gunner Palace* thematizes the hopelessness of locating a single truth, in its form and respect for its subjects."

I would argue that this theme of confusion and hopelessness about "the truth" dehistoricizes and depoliticizes the war itself and thus reflects the politics that dominate representations of war in the mainstream media and in most Hollywood fiction films. In this way, *Gunner Palace* contrasts with the best-known documentary about the Iraq War, Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*. The unabashedly oppositional stance of Moore's film comes across through his own commentary as well as other approaches such as dedicating significant screen time to discussions with a mom from his hometown, who tearfully expresses misgivings about the war after losing her son in combat.

For his part, Tucker can be said to be representing Operation Iraqi Freedom "objectively" because he does not make any such pronouncement on it at all. But his objectivity works both to present the possibility of critique and to undercut it. So while depicting the soldiers' stories, including their hardships, feelings of loneliness, and struggles with insufficient equipment, would seem to make this an anti-war film, by not specifically commenting on what the troops were doing and why they were there, this objectivity actually reads as support for the war because it reinforces the message that the troops are brave and selfless and that the war is all about them, which is precisely what the Pentagon counts on to win and maintain support for all contemporary military operations. As Tony Grajeda's insightful analysis of combat documentaries in *Jump Cut* 49 shows, the films' "concession[s] to 'realism'" that are meant to reflect the soldiers' perspective ultimately decontextualize and dehistoricize the reality they aim to convey.

One of the most glaringly decontextualized aspects of *Gunner Palace* is the limited representation of Iraqis. As with its TV predecessor, *Cops*, if the heroes are decontextualized, the ostensible bad guys — in this case the Iraqis — are even more vaguely presented and tend to serve in the film as occasions for action by the soldiers. In *Gunner Palace*, we hear very little from the Iraqis on what it feels like to be at war, especially a war ostensibly for their freedom and their future. The exception here is the Iraqis who work within the coalition who are given a few minutes of screen time. A typical such voice is Shamil, an interpreter, who appears in one of the cropped-image "confessional" segments. He tells the camera

> "They call us the 'betraitors.' They believe we betrayed our country because we are with the Army. They are the 'betraitors,' and we are the good guys. We know we are the

A translator explains, "They call us the betraitors."

"Mike Tyson" was accused of helping the insurgents.

Tyson is asked by the officer, "Do you want to be my prisoner or my guest?"

good guys because we want to make the new Iraq a good country, and they don't want this to happen because there will be no more war. And these people can't live without war….It's hard for them to change like that and see everyone happy."

When the only Iraqis given voice also happen to work for the occupiers, it is hard to oppose the occupation out of concern for Iraqi lives. But even these characters are basically decontextualized. And as for the forces who oppose the occupation, they have no real opportunity to articulate their perspectives at all. All we learn of them is that they are the "bad guys" who do not want to see "everyone happy."

Reinforcing this perspective, the Iraqis who do not work with the Gunners appear in the film generally as suspects or prisoners taken in nighttime raids of their homes. Even the random person on the street has to be suspect because the Gunners can never assume an Iraqi is not going to throw a rock or fire a weapon at them. Exemplifying this sense of mistrust, the soldiers find that even one of their translators, a man they call "Mike Tyson," began to work with the insurgency.

He is identified by two other Iraqis who work with the Army, "Roy" and "Super Cop," whom we learn "have captured over 300 insurgents." In contrast to the invasiveness of the shadowy nighttime raids when soldiers burst violently into the homes of frightened Iraqis in various states of dress, here the Iraqi man is sitting in a brightly lit office next to an Army officer. He winces in pain as U.S. soldiers examine his tight plastic handcuffs. The soldiers offer to loosen the cuffs for him and ask if he'd like to be their prisoner or their guest. He opts for "guest" and his handcuffs are removed. He is scared, but he is treated decently. This is the only post-arrest or interrogation scene in the film. We never see the torture or imprisonment indelibly linked to Abu Ghraib, the prison to which the suspected insurgents are sent. Roy summarizes the situation:

> "Whatever you give it to him, he will never respect anything. That's why Mohammed Tyson is detained, and he's going to be sentenced to Abu Ghraib for thirty years. That's it. It's easy. One plus one is two."

It is unclear exactly what was given to him, so the audience is left to believe that perhaps what Tyson does not appreciate is the presence of the troops themselves. But unlike Tyson and his arresting officer who appear in a medium shot, the camera captures Roy's analysis from an off angle that puts Roy in close-up, a shot that certainly can be read in contradictory ways. Is the close-up meant to show intimacy and Roy's trustworthiness, or is it meant to make Roy seem suspicious? Tucker's voiceover, with its tone and cadence reminiscent of Martin Sheen's Willard in *Apocalypse Now,* reinforces the sense of confusion.

> "Until a few weeks ago, Mohammed Tyson was a trusted member of Charlie Battery. Now he's been accused of identifying and photographing targets for the insurgents. If it's true he's responsible for at least three murders, and he'll

Roy pronounces Tyson's fate, "[H]e's going to be sentenced to Abu Ghraib for thirty years. That's it. It's easy."
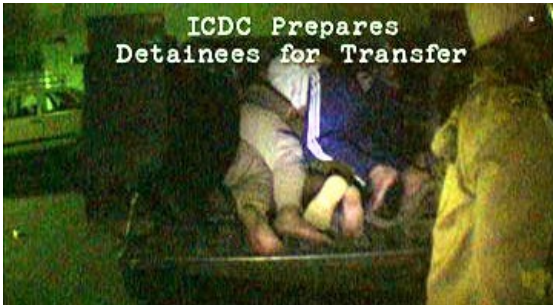
Detainees lying face-down in a truck.

be sent to Abu Ghraib prison. Nothing is black and white here."

If *Gunner Palace* acknowledges the uncertainty of conclusions — "nothing is black and white here" — the ultimate effect is to see the Iraqis as dangerous to the troops and therefore dangerous to *us*. Tucker's "if it's true" qualifier in the quotation barely registers, in great measure because it functions just like the disclaimer at the beginning of *Cops* announcing that "all suspects are innocent until proven guilty in a court of law." The statement lends the show a hint of fairness, but none of the profilmic events suggest there is any reason to doubt that the arrested are guilty. *Cops'* lack of follow-up on the cases of the arrested lends to the certainty of their guilt. The Iraqis function in *Gunner Palace* in a similar way. They look guilty, and so they are taken away, and we never hear from them again. Tyson becomes just another busted insurgent.

All these aspects — barely differentiated Iraqi people, slightly more differentiated U.S. soldiers, and *Gunner Palace*'s resemblance to *Cops* — embody the rationality behind U.S. war today. A documentary about U.S. troops in the Iraq War looks a lot like an iconic reality show about U.S. police officers because it reflects the key change marked by the War on Terror. The new way of war contrasts with military actions of previous years. Then, as cultural theorist Leerom Medovoi puts it,

> "every military confrontation was a police action....[N]ow we might say every police action, every response to the 'crime' of terror, has become an act of war" (73).

Go to page 2

Necropolitical war

President Bush landed on an air-craft carrier in combat costume to promote the War on Terror.

How did the United States get the opportunity to wage the Iraq War as part of the War on Terror when Iraq committed no terrorist act against the United States? Part of the answer is that many U.S. people blindly accepted the idea that Iraq's leader Saddam Hussein was a terrorist. But this is just one aspect of the answer. A fuller response takes some backtracking because dominant opinion in the United States post-Vietnam but pre-War on Terror saw military actions in very particular ways.

Militarily intervening in states whose politics were problematic to ostensible U.S. interests had been common practice during the Cold War but was considered too costly after Vietnam unless two conditions obtained: there were economic and humanitarian benefits to be had, and the conflict promised a low casualty count. For example, the 1991 Persian Gulf War showed that support for full-scale conflict was obtainable if the leadership followed the Powell Doctrine requirements of using overwhelming decisive force, asserting well-defined objectives, maintaining international support, and having a clear exit strategy.

The war in Iraq promised to be different. To promote his desired war, President George W. Bush offered ever-changing justifications for the U.S. invasion, including the allegation that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction, the claim that Saddam tried to have the previous President Bush assassinated (or as the younger Bush put it, "This is the guy who tried to kill my dad!"), and the uncorrected misperception that Saddam Hussain was behind the September 11 attacks. But eventually Bush's claims all morphed into a globalized variation of law-and-order ideology—"we" have to kill "them" over there before "they" come over here[1].[open endnotes in new window]

This ideology runs cover for a larger rationality behind many of today's wars. Theorist Achille Mbembe calls this rationality necropolitics. Necropolitics can be seen as a subset of Michel Foucault's biopower that characterizes contemporary sovereignty. Biopower consists of the power of "making live and letting die" as opposed to the older tradition of disciplinary sovereign power, say of a king who exercises the prerogative to "take life or let live" (249). If disciplinary power ultimately rests in the sovereign right to kill, biopower ultimately rests in governing through life processes such as mandating regimes to promote good health, for instance. But Mbembe and Foucault argue that the biopolitics that govern through life rely on a necropolitics in which the death of some is used to ensure the well-being of a population.

Racism stands at the heart of biopower as a way of dividing people by giving a biological-seeming justification for fragmentation and necropolitics. War becomes

> "not simply a matter of destroying a political adversary but of destroying the enemy race, of destroying that [sort] of biological

threat that those people over there represent to our race" (Foucault 255, 257).

And when the people we identify with go to war, it is to "regenerate" the race.

This rationality came to life in the Bush Doctrine. The Doctrine calls for preventive war, for invasion of sovereign territories based on a belief that the invaded people might become a threat. It is so radical because it instantiates the necropolitical relation that Mbembe says characterizes the West's relations to colonized territories—where all the standards of legal or just war created by Western modernity do not apply and should be defied. Thus, when Bush stated in his first major post-9/11 address, "Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists," and when in his 2002 *National Security Strategy of the United States* he claimed, "We must be prepared to stop rogue states and their terrorist clients before they are able to threaten or use weapons of mass destruction against the United States and our allies and friends," he unapologetically announced his version of law-and-order ideology promoted and enforced by necropower.

"Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists."

Bush's simplistic Manichean policy called for intervention not only when a nation launches an attack against the United States or even threatens to attack, but when any state or non-state actor (hence the fuzzy term "terrorist") may be *considering* nuclear, biological, or chemical weapons programs ("before they are able to threaten" to use such weapons). Indeed, even being friendly with such an entity can justify invasion. And as with law-and-order ideology, the fundamental problem lies not just with the criminal, or in the globalized version, the rogue state or terrorist. The problem is also caused by those who stand up for due process—that is, liberals, civil libertarians, opponents of war, and other ostensibly soft personalities—who are said to be hampering the police or the military effort. Just as law-and-order ideology overlooks structural causes of crime and instead uses racist, us-versus-them logics to explain social and legal problems, neoliberal war marshals racism to caricature an "enemy" that is only interested in the United States' destruction and therefore must be stopped—even before it poses an actual threat to the United States. Indeed, the National Security Strategy also stated a critical point—the United States would act unilaterally in any way it thought necessary to protect or promote the United States and would never again allow its military preeminence to be challenged as it had been during the Cold War.

The National Security Strategy would thus represent a challenge and a

change for the post-Cold War United States. It formally committed the United States to constant nation-building war and is thus an expensive proposition, in terms of both lives and treasure. The U.S. people's support would have to be won and maintained in order for such a goal to be accomplished. From the Administration's perspective, living out the implications of the National Security Strategy required not careful consideration of the conduct of war but careful consideration of how to sell war to the U.S. people.

From this perspective, I want to consider the United States' opening gambit in the Iraq War: the strategy of Shock and Awe. Associated with Harlan Ullman and James Wade, coauthors of 1996's *Shock and Awe*: *Achieving Rapid Dominance*, the strategy was adopted as part of the larger effort at "Force Transformation" (also known as the "Revolution in Military Affairs"), a Pentagon initiative that became Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's pet project. Transformation under Rumsfeld was an attempt to make the U.S. military as lean, high-tech, non-bureaucratic, and as much like a neoliberal corporation as possible. This effort would have many consequences including maximizing U.S. military dominance while minimizing the number of troops in combat and consequently minimizing the likelihood of U.S. public interference in the execution of war. According to Ullman and Wade, Shock and Awe delivers

The Shock and Awe campaign launched Operation Iraqi Freedom.

> "instant, nearly incomprehensible levels of massive destruction directed at influencing society writ large, meaning its leadership and public, rather than targeting directly against military or strategic objectives even with relatively few numbers or systems. The employment of this capability against society and its values... is massively destructive, strikes directly at the public will of the adversary to resist." (23)

Overwhelming the enemy is not a new strategy, but what makes it new is Ullman and Wade's combination of Hiroshima-and-Nagasaki levels of violent spectacle with the precision, surveillance, and communications abilities of the highest high technology. Indeed, they call for "brilliance in execution" as a requirement for success of their strategy. The goal of Shock and Awe is stated in their book's subtitle, "Achieving Rapid Dominance." That is the marker of success and the goal of the strategy. After all, "many challenges or crises in the future are likely to be marginal to U.S. interests and therefore may not be resolvable before American political staying

Rumsfeld tried to make the Defense

The crawls at the bottom of the screen during the Shock and Awe campaign narrate the context of the attack.

The military report that the campaign is causing "complete confusion" in Baghdad.

Back in San Francisco, an iconic location for anti-war protests, dozens are arrested protesting the start of the war.

power is exhausted" (37-38). Thus, Rapid Dominance is meant to demoralize the public being attacked while encouraging the U.S. public before it loses patience with a war it did not particularly want.

The promise of high-tech warfare is that it would ostensibly limit U.S. force commitment and losses by reducing the number of troops needed in the field. Indeed in the first heady days of the Iraq War, Ullman suggested there would be no need for ground warfare as was required in the Gulf War and thus almost no loss of U.S. life. That this sunny prediction turned out to be the very opposite of reality is not necessarily proof that Ullman and Wade's approach did not finally serve the Pentagon's purposes, however. It may in fact demonstrate that the intended target for Shock and Awe may not have only been the Saddam government—which did in fact fall quickly and with low U.S. casualties—but also the American people who also "fell" quickly believing that opposition to the war was just out of touch. That is to say, Shock and Awe may not only have helped erode the Iraqi military's will to fight, it also helped erode many Americans' will to oppose war by making any domestic opposition look hopelessly ineffectual and just plain out-of-touch in the face of the United States' inevitable and glorious victory.

Shock and Awe is not a strategy for dealing with a protracted counterinsurgency, as the Iraq War became, since it is intended primarily to reduce the need for U.S. troops to physically enter battle at all. Rapid Dominance is a strategy not only for protecting U.S. life but also for protecting American lifestyle. Wars for lifestyle are wars "without a threat or compelling reason" to adopt Ullman and Wade's phrase (38). These conflicts are not needed in terms of security but to protect the position of U.S. capital. Thus, the authors reason that war needs to be kept short and with as few risks to troops as possible, which leads to a key question, if the strategy is meant to keep troops out of battle, how does it enable protracted war?

September 11 changed the conditions that would ensure the U.S. people's support for war. It created a foundation that Shock and Awe, and Force Transformation in general, could build upon. For even if Shock and Awe was meant to be used in an environment in which casualty figures had to be kept exceedingly low in order to keep U.S. popular support, as it turned out, the strategy worked not by scaring the opponent's troops as much as changing the people back home, helping reorient the American population to support a prolonged "war on terror" because it made sure that militarism looks good to audiences watching on TV.

From this perspective, Shock and Awe worked to bridge the gap between previous U.S. war policy, which was largely a reaction to Vietnam, and a new period. In the United States, people were shocked and awed into blind support and one aspect of U.S. life that would begin to be "transformed" was the willingness to stay in a protracted war in order to regenerate the "American race."

If 9/11 was the immediate source of the changed attitude toward war, 9/11 itself did not lead to the Iraq War. Indeed, the initial U.S. response was to launch war in Afghanistan. Though utterly avoidable and rightfully avoided, the Afghanistan War was an easily predictable response that would not necessarily have marked the beginning of a different approach to war or a new era of U.S. relations with the world. Indeed, international support was relatively plentiful in Afghanistan, and the United States' initial bunker-busting attacks were deadly effective and could have led to a

very different outcome for al Qaeda and Afghanistan if the war had been fought with very specific goals, as was the Gulf War. But launching an internationally condemned and nearly unilateral war with Iraq, a nation well known not to be a threat, signaled a change in the United States' relations with the world. The United States would depart from its post-Cold War Washington Consensus posture of using neoliberal market reforms to promote U.S-defined interests.

According to Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine* one goal of the Iraq War was to build a nation governed by neoliberal principles. Whether her analysis is correct or not, it is certain that the Iraq War would continue to be fought long after most Americans understood there was no "threat or compelling reason" for U.S. involvement and long after the death toll reached previously unacceptable numbers; clearly there had been a significant change. The continued war was a sign of the success of techniques adopted by U.S. power to enable U.S. militarism.

Fetishizing the fighter

To remain a superpower and exercise superpower colonial prerogatives requires more than support for any particular war; it requires the maintenance of a military-industrial complex. This is a larger and longer-term historical, political, and ideological project than the execution of any single war. Central to that effort was a decades-long battle to put the members of the military at the center of the American national imaginary, and it is to them that I now turn.

It has been well established that once the U.S. goes to war, the American people will support the effort — regardless of their pre-war convictions. This apolitical stance is suited to imperialist war and it promotes a moral stance by which good citizenship depends not on supporting a necessary war but supporting war regardless of a conflict's rightness or its political goals (Lucas and McCarthy). But just as *Gunner Palace* (and *Cops* before it) gives its audience no particular warrior hero to identify with, the Iraq War offered mostly a vague idea of supporting the troops as seen in the ubiquitous "Support Our Troops" phrases that were plastered on the mundane surfaces of commercial life—everything from yellow-ribbon bumper magnets to pizza boxes. In this societal push to blindly support the troops, the United States underwent a depoliticization of war: supporting the troops has become an end in itself.

This depoliticization and unthinking loyalty fetishizes the soldier and is a key part of the way the population is mobilized. This fetishized view of the soldier has its roots in the Cold War when the Pentagon embarked on a PR effort to link the U.S. military with the institutions of civil society such as churches and schools. If the U.S. were to maintain a large standing army, it would have to reassure a population traditionally mistrustful of a strong central government that the enemy abroad was much worse than the potential threat from the nation's own executive branch or from the "unwholesome influence" of life away from home (see Loveland). But if a draft were a key element in making the United States a global power, so too the draft was key in making the military a power within the United States.

That is, in the Cold War's early years the draft helped make the military and militarism itself all-American. Key to that acceptance was a

Supporting the troops has become an end in itself.

During the Vietnam War, conscription bred resentment toward the services.

"Be All You Can Be" was an effective recruiting slogan for many years.

combination of the presence of an enemy easily caricatured as Godless, and the military's inclusion of special religious-based instruction as an element in basic military training instated in order to reassure small-town United States of the morality of the world outside. With these Cold War changes the foundation was set for the military to become as American as apple pie. By the early 1960s, public opinion had become generally very favorable toward the military and conscription (Loveland 805). However, with the escalation of the conflict in Vietnam, this favorable opinion would change. By the next decade, the draft had become as much an albatross as a lifeline for the war effort; it provided fighters but inspired tremendous resistance.

Ending the draft was the only way to stanch the considerable and widespread resentment that developed toward the military. The decades-long practice of conscription was no longer feasible in the U.S. context. As troops moved out of Vietnam and went about the more prosaic Cold War duties, the United States found new ways to attract the enlistees required to maintain its large standing army and its "empire of bases," to borrow a term from Chalmers Johnson. Catchy slogans such as "Be all you can be!" encouraged enlistment, especially among working-class youth who saw little chance of being all they could be without military service.

Indeed, "Be All You Can Be" emerges directly from a biopolitical perspective. People join the military not because the law forces them to but because they choose to in order to acquire the skills to become "successful" members of society. If studies reveal a clear connection between economic circumstances and military enlistment—a 10 percent increase in unemployment usually leads to a 5 percent increase in military enlistment (Bender)—we can nevertheless say of enlistees that they chose to sign up. However, it is more accurate to say that they were governed through their freedom to sign up. For as Nikolas Rose explains,

> "the present-day ethics of freedom itself, are not antithetical to power...but actually the resultants of specific configurations of power, certain technological inventions, certain more or less rationalized techniques of relating to ourselves" (54).

Furthermore, voluntary enlistment increases citizen support for the military and military action by making troops the best endorsement for the military itself. Their volunteer status suggests that they endorse the conflicts into which they are being deployed. As Christian Parenti writes, "Volunteering implicates [troops], effectively stripping them of the victim status that conscription allowed." Removing their victim status creates support for militarism as much as for the military's enlistees who can now be reframed as brave heroes as opposed to beleaguered victims of tragic political decisions, and since it is their lives on the line, opposition back home has a much tougher time resisting. (Note that the opposition's lives do not count in these negotiations.)

Just as effective in attaining support for service, but operating on a different level of insidiousness, has been the decades-old desire to apologize for the treatment of soldiers returning from the war in Vietnam. Reports of returning vets besieged at the airport by angry anti-war protestors abusing them with charges of "baby killer!" and spitting on them have created the image of the tragically unappreciated veteran—unloved and unwanted, he embodied the humiliation of loss and the sense of betrayal that arose in the wake of an unpopular imperialist war.

The main problem with this story of misplaced U.S. dissent is that it is an

urban legend. As Vietnam veteran Jerry Lembcke demonstrates convincingly in *The Spitting Image*, no one can corroborate these attacks on vets. There is no evidence that they happened. However, what is demonstrably true about the stories of alienated veterans coming home to be spat upon is that they have become key in deterring citizens from mobilizing against war in a fear of being perceived as not supporting the troops. It is this sympathy for unappreciated veterans that finally sealed the national ideological love for soldiers. Since Vietnam, Americans are expected to never question the goodness of the troops themselves. The troops' motives are to be presumed pure and untroubled by politics. It thus becomes inappropriate for opponents of a war to inject politics into what is ostensibly the post-political reality of troops in harm's way. Gaylyn Studlar and David Desser's "Rewriting the Vietnam War" argues that this depoliticization is the starting point for a narrative of victimization on which so many Vietnam films are built. From right-wing fictions like *Rambo* to the ostensibly progressive perspective of *Platoon*, the films represent the Vietnam War as a story of the victimization of the soldier.

Building from Studlar and Desser, Tony Grajeda shows that this perspective has become the starting point for Iraq War documentaries such as *Gunner Palace*. These representations of soldiers at war do not argue that the war is right or wrong—just that the warriors must live. In these representations the political becomes nonsense, or to put it more precisely, the political message may be accessible in the fact that justifications for the war are not mentioned. But this depoliticization, which is also a dehistoricization and reification, reflects the way soldiers themselves fight and the way the U.S. population supports them.

Troops in combat

Troops fight not for causes such as freedom and the other catchwords that are thrown about in political speeches. Troops fight for each other, and that has been one of the essential aspects shaping their training at least since General S.L.A. Marshall's hugely influential 1947 study *Men Against Fire* maintained that most soldiers did not actually fire their guns in combat. It was determined that the best way to increase troop kill rates was not to train them to fight for principles or even to follow orders, but to train them realistically and to encourage them to fight for each other and with a sense of cohesion. As Marshall argued,

> *"[The soldier's] first duty is to join his force to others!"* (127, Marshall's emphasis).

Marshall's study has since come under attack, but its impact has nevertheless been huge. In Iraq that impact was felt not only in training but also in the policy that soldiers would not generally leave combat individually but as whole companies (Parenti). Team that unit solidarity with the sense of obligation that arises from voluntary enlistment, and we see how loyalty and an unwillingness to break bonds with one's fellows creates a tremendous sense of obligation and duty. Troops are motivated to fight by the fact that they joined the military of their own free will and because they are fighting for their band of brothers. Tellingly, at the height of the Iraq War as the Army was struggling to sign new recruits, the Army Reserve exceeded its targets of re-enlisting soldiers, even though Reservists had been called up in unprecedented numbers to serve in active duty in Iraq. Moreover, large numbers of Reservists opted to enlist in the active-duty Army rather than reenlisting in the Reserves (Vanden Brook).
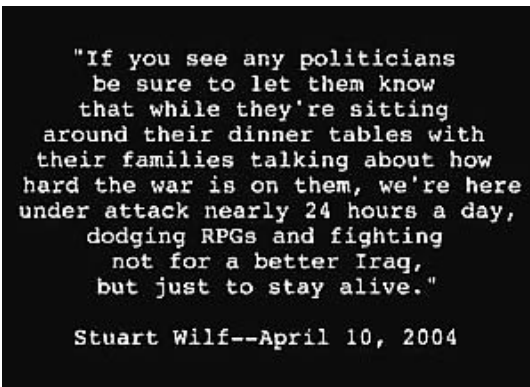

The Defense Department spent billions bringing in products from the U.S. to make the soldiers feel at home on deployment.

GIs dance at a pool party in Uday Hussain's former palace.

Most Iraqis appearing in the film support the ouster of Saddam.

"If you see any politicians
be sure to let them know
that while they're sitting
around their dinner tables with
their families talking about how
hard the war is on them, we're here
under attack nearly 24 hours a day,
dodging RPGs and fighting
not for a better Iraq,
but just to stay alive."

Stuart Wilf--April 10, 2004

Combat films often represent the aim of war as being about the troops' survival rather than any political purpose.

Despite this wide willingness to reenlist and fight, the numbers of active duty personnel were not increasing sufficiently to staff two wars and maintain the empire of bases. Nevertheless, there was no draft. Conscription would have destroyed much of the support (or tolerance) the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars received. Instead the U.S. military relied increasingly on staffing through privatization; that is, by using military contractors. This allows the whole world in effect to be recruited for the U.S. military since contractors come from all parts of the globe. Though it is claimed that they lower costs by bringing competition and efficiency, in Iraq they were vehicles of unprecedented excess because there was almost no competition for contracts. Defense services corporation Halliburton-KBR (now just KBR) alone earned in the first years of the Iraq War three times what it cost the United States to fight the entire Gulf War (Singer, "Can't Win" 2). In truth, these contractors' most important role from the Pentagon perspective was to enable military policy to be conducted with little public input and thus to disable the opposition. So while their job was to increase manpower, it was also to make those troops deployed as comfortable as possible.

Like all military forces in combat, those deployed in Iraq were putting themselves in the gravest danger, but the reality of everyday life in combat was very different from any previous U.S. war experience. Private contractors provided services to make troops feel at home—as much as possible in the middle of a war in a foreign land. These troops often lived in permanent or semi-permanent operating bases, such as Gunner Palace, and they ate diets so rich that they gained an average of ten pounds on deployment (Kennedy). From a counterinsurgency rationale, these deployment conditions are irrational—they inspired tremendous resentment among the civilian population, required incalculable resources to maintain (*incalculable* because of the massive graft and corruption that accompanies this way of war), and necessitated dangerous supply runs in order to bring the provisions to the bases. But from the contractors' perspective such services made perfect sense:

> "the bigger the bases they build and operate, the more fast food franchises they open, the more salsa dance lessons they offer, the more money that the firm makes" (Singer, "Corporate Warriors" 5).

It is worth contrasting the position of the contractors to that of the troops. While both contractors and members of the armed services can be said to be in service by choice, at least choice as made possible within the logic of capitalism, contractors can quit their jobs whenever they choose to. Members of the military cannot. And thus management of active duty personnel—and this category includes Reservists and National Guard troops—is different than managing contractors.

Private contractors remain in service in Iraq for any number of private reasons, but certainly one key factor is that their pay is quite high. At war's start, the annual salary for an Army specialist or corporal with more than four years' experience was $21,769; truck drivers working for private firms could take home $80,000-100,000 in one year (Kidwell 54). Enlisted people thus are governed, at least in part, by something other than the immediate need for a paycheck. Though pay is essential, these combatants are governed through other motivations including their sense of fraternal loyalty. To understand the implications of this loyalty, we must sidetrack back to Vietnam.

The claim from all the soldiers is that we cannot understand their experience unless we have been in Iraq.

While this sense of fraternal loyalty generally achieves the military's aims, the experience of Vietnam showed that if soldiers fight to protect each other, they might also *resist* fighting to protect each other. Indeed, the Vietnam War gave birth not just to a strong civilian anti-war movement but a strong GI anti-war movement. In short, the military may be playing a dangerous game in making the troops themselves the reasons soldiers fight.

Many speculate that Nixon shifted the ground war to the air in Vietnam because troops on the ground increasingly refused to fight. Fragging—that is, intentionally wounding or killing a fellow member, often a superior officer, of one's own military—is the most excessive case of combat refusal. But it was a fact of life and death for soldiers on the ground in Vietnam, where in 1970, for instance, the Army reported 109 cases of fragging. Certainly, the likelihood of such extreme instances of combat refusal occurring increase in a protracted, directionless war when all that remains among personnel are their connections to each other.

If widespread insurrection is not a part of Vietnam War history that officials highlight or that schoolroom U.S. history texts even mention, the insurrectionists' message is being contested in the anti-politics bias of most texts representing American war. If war is politics by another name, and if the politics leading to war make no sense, then war makes no sense. But the conclusion from that syllogism is not necessarily to avoid war. Very often the conclusion is to fight wars for reasons other than politics. And that apolitical orientation structures embedded-reporter narratives like *Gunner Palace.*

Thus in *Gunner Palace*, the conflicts the protagonists find themselves embroiled in are "deadly but vaguely ennobling" (80) as critic Tom Bissel puts it. I would argue that it is vaguely ennobling in showing the soldiers as they try to explain to the cameras that only people who have been in the war can really understand it. One of the more memorable lines from the film comes from Sergeant Robert Beatty who claims,

> "If you watch this, you're going to go get your popcorn out of the microwave and talk about what I say. You'll forget me by the end."

The claim from all these soldiers is that we cannot understand their experience and probably don't really care unless we have actually been there. The soldiers thus present their experience as auratic and this representation reifies the war; it becomes an experience in itself, outside of context. To remove political and historical context can make war into a noble adventure or a tragic trauma but the effect either way is to depoliticize and dehistoricize the event as if the troops were the reason for the war.

Spc. Richmond Shaw: "[F]or y'all this is a show, but we live in this movie."

A GI ironically describes the improvised armor on his Humvee that had just come under attack.

Why we fight: the Vietnam syndrome

Just as troops are trained to support each other, so too the U.S. public has been trained to support the troops.

> "For many Americans, a war ethics has given way to this warrior ethics — to a focus on bonds of fidelity experienced by fellow soldiers amid the inhumanity of war....Unlike the politics of American duty, the contemporary imperative of war is to stand by our soldiers regardless of political purposes" (Lucas and McCarthy 176-77).

This support connects us back to Vietnam and the national hand wringing over the treatment of returning soldiers. Indeed, most representations of the war in film and television argue that politics and principles do not really make any sense; all that matters is the band of brothers with whom one fights (Lucas and McCarthy).

So if soldiers fight mostly for reasons outside of the official national ideologies of spreading freedom, ensuring liberty, and protecting the rule of law, the U.S. people generally support them for reasons outside of those ideologies as well. And this sense of commitment to the soldiers' unity has been translated to mean that support of the military is essential for the troops' survival. The practice of training troops to fight for each other was now made manifest throughout the population; the United States would go to war to maintain bonds with the troops.

Here we must reconsider the so-called Vietnam Syndrome. It was not, as William Safire labeled it "that revulsion at the use of military power." It was a reluctance to get into war for reasons that did not include the troops themselves. So too, the Cold War motives of the Vietnam War have largely been reframed so that the war is now often seen as a struggle over what kind of nation the United States was internally and how Americans victimized the troops.

And in answer to the pragmatic question that arose after the end of the Cold War — Why keep a huge military force if there is no huge military enemy? — the answer is provided in part by the mere existence of the force itself. This is not to deny that Americans value security and actual force strength, but it is to recognize that the reasons for militarization tend to be highly emotional. Regardless of the specific conditions of any military intervention post-Vietnam, the existence of the military helps provide its justification for its continued existence.

This circularity was fully realized in the Gulf War where a well-coordinated media campaign by the White House and Pentagon "conflated the objectives of war with those who had been sent to fight the war" (Lembcke 20). The initial goal as stated by George H.W. Bush's Secretary of State James A. Baker of keeping Middle Eastern oil flowing uninterruptedly to the United States was apparently seen as too mercenary and was just not

Soldiers fall to the ground laughing at the ironic description of their inadequate equipment.

The scene could be a powerful critique of the military's commitment to troops safety, but their laughter simultaneously rewrites their vulnerability as an example of their bravery.

Al Jazeera gave voice to the Iraqis on the ground.

resonating. So a pathos-laden case was fabricated about Iraqi atrocities toward helpless Kuwaiti women and tiny Kuwaiti babies—and that helped move sympathy a bit. But what really created support for the war was the war itself. Certainly, the Powell Doctrine's guarantees helped but ultimately it was putting the troops in "harm's way," as the cliché goes, that got the U.S. people behind the effort (See Lembcke and Kellner). Eventually, a desire to apologize to the troops for the national lack of gratitude about Vietnam became part of the war justification structure. Vietnam veterans were even invited to march in parades held to honor the US's victory in the Gulf War.

So too the younger President Bush initiated his war in Iraq with a chaff-filled campaign of multiple ad hoc justifications for deploying U.S. troops, after which he just launched them into battle. But deposing Saddam Hussein and occupying Iraq as opposed to simply moving Saddam out of Kuwait as the United States did in the Gulf War would require more impetus than merely moving the troops into position; in the case of the Iraq War, 9/11 helped provide that, but it was the "Support the Troops" mantra that kept support steady for the war as it developed over the first few years. It was only when troops continued dying and the situation on the ground in Iraq did not significantly improve that support for the war broadly began to shift. But in supporting the war no less than in calling for its end, the justification is always the wellbeing of the troops (and, incidentally, not the Iraqi people!)

Gunner Palace operates precisely on this terrain. It attempts to be a representation of soldiers at war outside of politics and outside of history, not commenting on whether the war is right — just that the warriors deserve to live. One of the film's most poignant moments comes when one of the Gunners makes an ironic commentary about their inadequate armor. He is captured in a medium shot as he guides the camera operator on a "tour" of a vehicle that had just been through an improvised-explosive-device (IED) attack.

> "Part of our $87 billion budget, provided for us to have some secondary armor put on top of our thin-skinned Humvees. This armor was made in Iraq. It's high-quality metal, and it will probably slow down the shrapnel so that it stays in your body instead of going clean through. And that's about it."

As he finishes, soldiers in his company literally fall to the ground laughing at the harsh reality of their life near death. A title is inserted over the image of a soldier overcome with laughter:

> "With 18 Confirmed IED Attacks, Charlie Battery holds the Task Force record."

It is in such moments that the film leans toward a much-needed critique of how the Defense Department failed the grunts on the ground. But the criticism is neither sustained nor substantiated, and the soldiers' laughter, which lends the critique its poignancy, serves in the same minute to undercut it. We can write off their tragic vulnerability as another example of the soldiers' bravery and honor. And because these soldiers joined of their own accord, their deep vulnerability makes them that much braver.

Failures of communication

The Al Jazeera control room represented in the 2004 Iraq War documentary *Control Room*.

Marine Josh Rushing articulates the Defense Department point of view to the world's media.

Al Jazeera's Hassan Ibrahim argues, "Democratize or I'll shoot" does not work as a political strategy.

From the soldiers' perspective, their experience in Iraq is utterly incomprehensible to those who have not fought, and this claim serves to heighten the viewers' attempted identification with them, even if audiences know they cannot fully comprehend the war from movie representations. The soldiers, however, do not acknowledge that their reality of war is not uncomplicatedly real and shaped by just being there; it too is shaped by war films and news coverage and by the fact that they are aware they are being filmed. *Gunner Palace* shows soldiers living their lives in a state of heightened self-awareness that is as essential for survival in war as it is for popularity in reality-TV or reality-TV-inspired cinema. As one palace poet, Specialist Richmond Shaw, explained it,

> "But when those guns start blazing and our friends get hit/
> That's when our hearts start racing and our stomach's get
> woozy/Cuz for y'all this is just a show, but we live in this
> movie."

What the audience rarely saw "living in the movie" were the Iraqi people themselves. Americans might imagine that there was great suffering but actually saw very little of it—not just in this film but also in U.S. coverage of the war in general. Jehane Noujaim's documentary, *Control Room* (2004) offers crucial insight here, even if the war she shows happens in the control room of the Arabic news network Al Jazeera and in the U.S. Army's Central Command in Qatar — ground zero for media covering the pre-"mission accomplished" ground war before George W. Bush declared that the United States had won "the Battle of Iraq." What Noujaim's documentary does so well is show the constructedness of war while letting viewers see its Iraqi victims — even if our view of them is through Al Jazeera footage.

This documentary differs from *Gunner Palace* not only in showing the suffering of Iraqis but by individuating the subjects of the film and letting the audience know the people on the scene. These "characters" help the audience understand the war through somewhat different perspectives — especially by depicting Marine media manager Josh Rushing debate Al Jazeera journalist Hassan Ibrahim. Of course, what is missing in both this film and *Gunner Palace* are any developed Iraqi "characters" on the ground. *Control Room* is about the media and especially Al Jazeera's coverage of the war, not exactly about the war itself. But at least this approach to the conflict is very different from the Pentagon's. I cannot say the same thing about *Gunner Palace*.

There the Iraqis are nebulous, undifferentiated, except in notable instances such as when the translator betrays the troops. This is a point *Control Room* makes: neither the U.S. media nor military establishment understands the significance of the war to the people of the Middle East — which is not to make some essentializing argument that all people of the Middle East are the same. Again this is a point *Control Room* covers well: it shows the diversity of the region, which we can see just in the Al Jazeera control room itself. But the war did its part to at once exacerbate long-standing divides while at the same time heightening a popular sense of Middle Eastern unity — at least when it comes to dealing with the United States. And this U.S. unwillingness to see the Iraqi people, or the people of

Al Jazeera shows footage of U.S. soldiers ordering Iraqis to the ground.

Producer Samir Khader speaking about Al Jazeera's news coverage: "Rumsfeld calls it 'incitement.' I call it the only journalism in the world."

Al Jazeera translates a speech by Donald Rumsfeld.

Spc. Gary L. Nelson III
U.S. Army, Age 20
Woodstock, GA

the Middle East, in little other than in the most generalized perspective is an old dynamic that Edward Saïd discussed decades ago when he argued that media representations give us little more than

> "a series of crude, essentialized caricatures of the Islamic world presented in such a way as to make that world vulnerable to military aggression" (189).

Indeed, if *Gunner Palace's* perspective mirrors the Pentagon's view of the war, then we could see from that early representation that the war was not going to be won. For if the film — like the Pentagon — is self aware, it is not at all aware of the people of Iraq, even if it was the Iraqis who, in the midst of civil conflict brought on by the invasion and the power vacuum it created, were being killed at the rate of one hundred per day by summer 2006.

Gunner Palace reflects the undifferentiated pose of traditional media representations of the Middle East. In the end this unwillingness to make distinctions reflects the Pentagon's attitude toward the war. The ideas and images that have emerged from official discourse were vague: the soldiers are noble; the reasons for the war are irrelevant; and the Iraqis are a heaving mass, a roadblock to an unexpressed goal and their resistance is a deadly nuisance. Therefore, on some level *Gunner Palace* illustrates failures of communication. We see officers who try to manage populations to whom they cannot speak. We see Arabic interpreters who betray their U.S. employers. And we see soldiers who maintain that the audience cannot understand the experience of war. But we can also see the film as itself a case study in the failure of communication because it fails to communicate who fought in this war despite its claims to cover the reality of the life of the fighting forces.

But more importantly, the film fails to communicate the dimensions of human suffering that are at the root of war. For instance, the narrator tells us that one of the Gunners dies, but we never get to know him. We hear the filmmaker had a special affection for the dead soldier, but we never really see that relationship. Indeed, this tendency in the film reflects in its own way, the Bush Administration policy that did not allow the public to see the coffins of dead U.S soldiers.[2] [open notes in new window] The most that was shown was a photo from before the soldier or Marine went to war, usually in a segment with a name like "Fallen Heroes" at the end of the evening news. Sometimes the picture was an official military photo, say of a serious-faced private in uniform, other times a guy sitting on the couch in a rec room in a suburban home; on occasion, it was a wide-smiling graduate in a cap and gown. These images were placed next to a name, rank, age, hometown. Occasionally, we might learn a little more personal information about the fallen like the number of children they left behind or their pre-war occupations or the sports teams they played on, but that was mostly it.

If the public felt any sorrow for the loss of thousands of U.S. service members in combat, it was a sorrow most people in the United States had to choose to feel. But there was little compelling most Americans to even *notice* any casualties at all since those were very deliberately placed in the background. That is the same choice *Gunner Palace* allows us as well. We can choose to care a little or not at all. And this too seems to be a failure of communication since the war is being fought in the U.S. people's name, with U.S. tax dollars, and purportedly for U.S. safety.

However, from the dominant Pentagon perspective, failure of

The death of a serviceman marked at the end of a news broadcast.

Profiles from the Front Lines, a short-lived TV program chronicling the U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan, became the model for embedded reporting in Iraq.

Shelby Monroe, a reporter from a Tennessee newspaper embedded for 101 days with the 101st Airborne: "When you ride around in a Humvee, you bond with the soldiers."

communication means something quite different: it means failure to control communication. And this according to many U.S. war apologists is the purported failure that led to the United States' loss in Vietnam. For it was ostensibly the media that eroded domestic support for that war by showing the horrors of the battlefield. George H.W. Bush's Pentagon dealt with the "problem" of battlefield journalism in the Gulf War by strictly controlling media access, keeping the press in tight pools, and deciding when, where, and who would be interviewed. The memorable images from that war were not the frontline troops but the impact video shot from the nose cones of missiles as they headed with deadly precision toward their targets (and failing precision, viewers could at least see that *something* was blown to smithereens). As many scholars have commented at length, this approach gave the U.S. viewer the unfeeling and unthinking point of view of the weapon (see Baudrillard's *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*).

George W. Bush's Pentagon developed a whole other method for dealing with the media and the "failures" of communication they could cause. In the Iraq War, the media were managed not by limiting their access but by giving them full access to their subjects; that is, by embedding reporters with the troops. In pragmatic terms, because the reporters' safety depended on these troops, the reporter would certainly be unlikely to relate anything controversial. Furthermore, that kind of constant monitoring of battle by reporters also meant that reporters were themselves subject to being closely monitored by troops. But that is not really the genius of embedding, for certainly a reporter could file any critical stories upon returning to the United States. The real genius from the Pentagon perspective is the same genius that goes into training today's forces.

That is, both embedding and today's training emphasize camaraderie. Like the military, the press is governed through its freedom and sense of loyalty to the troops. Indeed, the "success" of this approach was most evident in the emphasis of the media's coverage: given the possibility of investigating the Pentagon's claims about weapons of mass destruction or exposing the abuse and torture of prisoners, the embedded media chose to cover the human interest story of the troops in battle. As with WWII coverage, these media felt allied with troops. But unlike WWII, media had the legal possibility of disseminating critical or investigative stories but generally chose not to because of instructions from pro-war corporate ownership or fear of blowback from audiences and others charging them with demoralizing the troops.

Several points are important to note here. The first is that the idea for embedding as it was conducted in Iraq came from a short-lived program made by master ideologist Jerry Bruckheimer—the reactionary movie mogul behind *Black Hawk Down, Pearl Harbor, Armageddon,* and *Top Gun* — who teamed up with Bertram Van Munster — producer of *Cops*. The show *Profiles from the Front Line*, which got up-close and personal with troops deployed in Afghanistan, was such a success by the Pentagon's reckoning that it authorized the process more widely resulting in embedding becoming the signature journalistic style of the war.[3]

This approach would seem to contrast with the footage from missile nose cones that was the signature style of the Gulf War. But what needs to be understood is that the two types of coverage — U.S. troop perspective and U.S. missile perspective — actually have everything to do with each other. Both are products of a biopolitical approach to warfare whose goal is to kill the ostensible enemy while "regenerating the race" by conditioning the U.S. public to support militarism. The nose-cone camera, like Shock and Awe,

An Al Jazeera reporter ducks to avoid US fire.

Al Jazeera reporter Tarek Ayyoub was killed in a U.S. airstrike that hit the network's Baghdad headquarters.

Jane Fonda protesting the Vietnam war.

Jane Fonda explains in *Sir! No Sir!* that she was operating *within* the GI anti-war movement.

was a key strategy to promote U.S. support for war. Both approaches are perfect for wars in a mass-mediated society. So too the embedded reporter is ultimately a PR stunt perfect for wars in the era of the twenty-four-hour news network. It lionizes the troops, and because of the appearance of openness, ultimately shapes the message far more effectively than actual regulation and censorship of the media.

That this potential for extensive coverage also opens the potential for release of footage detailing abuse and civilian casualties is a point that could hardly have been lost on strategists. As it turned out, this was not a problem. Thus, despite Constitutional protections guaranteed the U.S. press, it was the international press who aired the stories the U.S. military did not want released. Most significant was their willingness to provide the graphic visual evidence of reported events: for example, day-to-day violence in Iraq, extensive Abu Ghraib photos, and the "Downing Street memo" revealing George Bush's very early intent to go to war in Iraq. Indeed, the only reporters the Pentagon directly impeded were those who were not willing or able to embed: foreign media who covered the war from non-coalition perspectives and reporters who stayed unattached to any unit. In the early days of the war, it was these un-embedded reporters who were in the most physical danger, and the danger came less from Iraqi fighters than from the U.S. military, as evidenced, for example, by the shelling of Baghdad's Palestine Hotel, well known to be the lodgings of the international press and resulting in five casualties (Committee to Protect Journalists) or the missile strike that hit Al-Jazeera's headquarters in Baghdad that became a central event in *Control Room*.

In those early days of the war, such events, explained as accidents, were certainly made likely to happen because of Pentagon strategies like "Shock and Awe" that advocated unsparing levels of violence. And like embedding, Shock and Awe was born as much out of the Pentagon's desire to avoid its "failures" of communication as to defeat an enemy. Indeed, to fully understand the Executive Branch's attitude to war, we need simply note erstwhile White House Chief of Staff Andy Card's explanation for the March start date of Operation Iraqi Freedom: "From a marketing point of view, you don't introduce new products in August."

All of these policies effectively work to contain opposition. But even representations that focus on opposition to war, such as the insufficiently recognized *Sir! No Sir!* (2005) — a documentary about the GI anti-Vietnam War movement — still operate along the support-the-troops logic. Indeed, Jane Fonda, the utter embodiment of troop hating for the militaristic set, makes a point of explaining in the film that she was working with *GI*s in opposition to the war. It is the service personnel who legitimize her opposition to the war, so yet again, the soldiers' experience is privileged — not just because soldiers make up the focus of the film but as a justification in itself. Taking this perspective to its logical conclusion, the Iraq War should have ended when the soldiers said it was over. But of course, they are not really the reason the United States fights; they are the reason Americans support (and sometimes resist) the fighting. Thus, what we see is a kind of unit cohesion writ large upon the U.S. population that relates back to the earlier discussion of *Cops*. In that representational frame, the police are always the heroes. So too it is assumed that the people they arrest are always the bad guys. But really, their guilt or innocence does not matter: it is the showing up and arresting someone that is important. And that same representational frame was operating in the first years' coverage of the war. If the troops were in a war, then the war was the right thing for

Eventually popular support and media coverage of the war began to fade.

the troops to be in and the right thing for the United States to be in. From *Gunner Palace* to *Cops* to the twenty-four-hour news, promises of showing everyday Americans the true stories of combat and crime ultimately erode political discourse and elevate the necropolitical perspectives that promote contemporary U.S. war law-and-order ideology. In Iraq, as soon as the war could no longer be easily seen in that framework, the war coverage began to fade and eventually so did the American people's support.

[Go to Notes page](#)

Notes

1. George W. Bush offered many variations on this theme, but just to offer one typical quotation from an April 2007 speech to troops at Fort Irwin, California, "The strategy is to defeat the enemy overseas so we don't have to face them here at home." [return to page 2]

2. This policy changed in Barack Obama's administration. [return to page 3]

3. Note that by the standards of network television the show was apparently a failure as ABC neither renewed it nor allowed it to continue on to Baghdad, a front line from which Bruckheimer received Pentagon permission to film (Gillies).

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# Narrating the global: pedagogy and disorientation in *Syriana*

by Kfir Cohen

Whether watching *Syriana* for the first or even the third time, whether at the time of its release in 2005 or now, viewers often leave the film with a sense that they have been offered an intelligent lesson about global power relations, yet such a lesson seems almost impossible to articulate given the intricate relations between agents, interests, and events.

I have dubbed this immediate sense of insight and confusion as pedagogy and disorientation. In what follows I offer a reading of the film that would try to explain the pedagogical and disorienting elements in *Syriana*, and indicate how its juxtaposition of events teaches us something about the current moment we term *globalization*.

An ambitious treatment of globalization, *Syriana* embraces the most influential actors and precious objects on the world stage. What propels the film forward, an event taking place before the film begins, is the decision of a Persian Gulf Emir – Prince Nasir (Alexander Siddig) – to grant an oil contract to the Chinese rather than to a U.S. corporation, Connex. To compensate for its loss, Connex mergers with another, smaller oil company, Killen, run by Jimmy Pope (Chris Cooper), who happens to just win a big oil contract in Kazakhstan. However, as the firms plan their merger, the Department of Justice (David Clennon) launches an investigation into both firms as it believes the Kazakhstan contract was gained illegally. To manage the damage, Connex seeks the mediation of its Washington law firm,
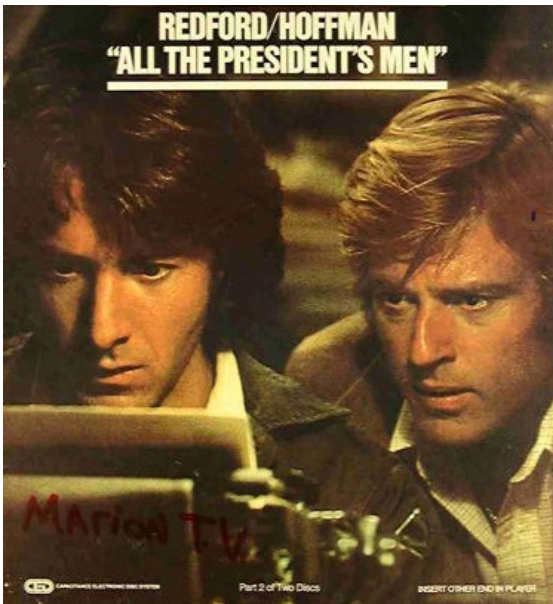
All The President's Men as the older type of conspiracy film.

The Parallax View. "Political" matrial as allgory for "economic" significance.

Syriana: violence as the dialectical opposite of economic "growth."

Whiting and Sloan (Christopher Plummer), who sends Sydney Hewitt (Nick Henson) and his "boy" Bennett Holiday (Jeffery Wright) to investigate internally.

Woven into this story's "economic" plotline is a "political" struggle between Islam and the West, taking on the twin motifs of ideological indoctrination and terrorism waged in the Gulf, the very country of Prince Nasir. Here we see Bob Barnes (George Clooney), a CIA agent. After his mission to assassinate Prince Nasir fails, he is being falsely investigated as a rogue agent. This leads him to investigate independently the reasons and people behind the assignation, and his search eventually, if followed closely, ties the stories together. The other two storylines are that of Brian Woodward (Matt Damon), an American ex-pat energy analyst who befriends Prince Nasir, and Wasim Khan (Mazhar Munir), a Pakistani immigrant worker who is laid off once the Chinese take over the contract in the Gulf. Although important to the film's unfolding, these two serve the affective side of the story more (other than Barnes, we sympathize with them the most). But those two characters' storylines are perhaps also the most effective in the film, in the sense that their fates are cast as external effects of the other, larger plotlines: Wasim becomes a "terrorist" and Woodward serves as a witness to Nasir's actions and translates his intentions to us.

So in its four interweaving stories *Syriana* offers us a map of connections all over the world. Blogger Philip Dhingra has come up with a visual map of all characters and stories, allowing us to see how "it's all connected," how it proves to the unsuspecting newspaper reader that a terrorist attack in the Gulf, appearing in the headline, has everything to do with a merger of U.S. oil companies in the business sector.[1] [open endnotes in new window] And yet Dhingra's map works to create a leveling effect, reducing all actors and events to the same plane. By doing so, that schematic effaces the real achievement of *Syriana*. For the film as it plays out shows us how the different and what we take to be discreet levels of the social world themselves change as they come into contact with one another, which, in turn, changes our understanding of them as well. Anticipating a later moment in this argument, what I suggest is that mapping the connections between discreet entities misses the point that the very meaning of an "economic" agent and a "political" agent change as they

Nasir's own attempt at reflcting on power relations.

Migrant workers as "raw matrial" for capital.

Migrant workers as a "moral" for the First World spectator.

Fleeting appearance of the "Chinese."

interact, and this change is what globalization means for us at this point in time.

So using Dhingra's puzzle "solution" as a foil, I hope to get closer instead to *Syriana's* specific pedagogy, which is to reveal, to make visible, not simply global connections but rather the kinds of *relations* between the "economic" and the "political."

To address this problematic, I would like to turn to Fredric Jameson's earlier attempt to think through globalization and film in his 1992 *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*. Consistent over the years in his insistence on the category of totality and its appearance only in its displaced signs, Jameson continues to offer us an allegorical reading of cinema. Only this time, the films are meant to figure not simply this or that national situation, but rather the more encompassing effects and relations of the world system. In the principle essay "Totality as Conspiracy," focusing primarily on 1970s First World conspiracy films, Jameson argues that in the moment of postmodernity or globalization,

> "the older motif of conspiracy knows a fresh lease on life, as a narrative structure capable of reuniting the minimal basic components: a potentially infinite network, along with a plausible explanation of its invisibility: or, in other words: the collective and the epistemological."[2]

In Jameson's analysis, the twin questions of collectivity (the social world as a totality) and epistemology (the manner in which we come to discover or know this reality) is considered dialectically. According to Jameson, the specific historical configuration of the infinite network, entering the text as content and raw material, necessitates a particular kind of form: that of the investigation of conspiracy in its different permutations. It will become evident in a moment what an infinite network might mean, but before we continue we should remember that the investigation or search of an absent totality is not new and has been with bourgeois life ever since its inception. Georg Lukács' *Theory of the Novel* remains a reliable source here:

> "the novel is the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given, in which the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem... [T]he novel seeks, by giving form, to uncover and construct the concealed totality of life... Thus the fundamental form-determining intention of the novel is objectified as the psychology of the novel's heroes: they are seekers."[3]

To bring Lukács' language a bit closer to us and give a sense of what an "infinite network" is, I note here Gaghan's own account of the screenplay:

> "it's a giant system, and it's all seems linked and all the players know all the other players and the world is very small. The decision makers in the Middle East and

Connex-Killeen wins back contract in the Gulf.

Meeting with Mussawi.

Meeting with Hizballah.

"American Decline": Bryan as the object of a "totalizing gaze" not emanating from the United States.

Washington, the guys that affect cross paths… [so] how [do you] capture that…"[4]

Gaghan's reified notion that the system is the sum total of the players notwithstanding, I take his interest in trying to "capture" the system as a good example of what it might mean to represent an "infinite network." In other words, if we follow Lukács and Jameson, *Syriana* seeks to represent, to give form, to these global relations (the network, the system, totality, etc.) and its twin investigations is the narrative form through which we glimpse this totality and its meaning. The script's twin investigations set up a narrative form through which we glimpse this totality and its meaning.

The film's burden then is not to invent a symbol for this totality—think of an image of Earth from the moon or Barack Obama and Hu Jintao shaking hands—but rather, much more difficult to accomplish, to offer some kind of insight into its reality, which endows the text with what Jameson sometime terms its "cognitive function," be it conscious or unconscious. To be sure, according to Jameson the totality cannot be given in itself, hence leaving us to glean it only in its effects, or, in Jameson's words, in its allegorical signs:[5]

> "The narrative cannot but remain allegorical, since the object it attempts to represent – namely, the social totality itself – is not an empirical entity and cannot be made to materialize as such in front of the individual viewer. In effect, the new figure we are here asked to supply continues to suggest something other than itself, in the occurrence a conspiracy that is in reality a (class) war."[6]

So for Jameson, the significance of 1970s conspiracy films is not that they point a finger at specific political figures, but rather that they offer us a displaced (i.e., unconscious) allegory for the world system itself.

Yet when reflecting on *Syriana,* it is useful to wonder how much the film suggests "something other than itself" and not the thing itself? For example, *Syriana* cannot be described simply as a "conspiracy" film but rather, as we might call it today, a globalization film. What one notices at the very outset, even before getting down to doing a close reading of its specific elements, is that *Syriana* with its explicit geopolitical themes strikes the eye as an explicit, or as Jameson would say, *conscious* film about the world system.[7] .This change suggests that our understanding of globalization should be reconsidered in order to account for such a conscious treatment of globalization in First World entertainment media where none was expected.

I invoked in passing the two narrative levels that seemed to be at play in *Syriana* – the economic and the political which could be also understood as the private and general (or public) interest. *Syriana's* pedagogy is such that it does not just tell us a cautionary tale about U.S. imperialism and the disastrous political effects of securing oil reserves. It surely does this as well, but this aspect of the film provides what seems to me its weakest moments, as it freezes structural

"Family" as the last resort when the political and the economic are merged.

The "Arab" is still associated with nature and a noble character.

Terror as a consequence of capital's expanding.

Bob Barnes.

interests in conscious ideological statements at key moments (that have the same weight as primal scenes).[8] Rather, it seems to me that the film articulates quite well relations between the private and the public, the economic and the political. A good way to understand this is to note how *Syriana* differs from the conspiracy films of the 1970s, which seem to have served Gaghan and Clooney as a model.[9] In films such as Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation*, Sydney Pollock's *Three Days of the Condor*, and Alan J. Pakula's *All the President's Men* and *The Parallax View*, we have one line of investigation and usually one detective, whose plotline leads to the uncovering of the conspiracy network. Jameson suggests that these films' allegorical structure works to align the economic and the political in a lateral manner:

> "if you want to say something about economics… you do so with political material (such is indeed the general interpretive of this chapter, that the economic organization of multinational capitalism is in the conspiracy form conveyed by the shifting shapes of power). On the other hand, if you want to say something about politics… it is by way of economic raw material…"[10]

In other words, political power relations are used as an allegory for corporate relations and vice versa; the two levels never co-exist.[11] With *Syriana* not only do we have two (seemingly) unrelated characters who uncover the two networks at play, the characters' are quite elegantly divided between an investigation into a private business executed by Bennet Holiday at Connex-Killen and an investigation into a public one, carried out by Bob Barnes at the CIA. The existence of investigations at both social levels at the same time suggests a different allegorical structure. For what becomes evident as the film progresses is the fact that the expansion of capitalism, its need to secure more and more natural resources, confronts a political limit in the figure of a sovereign state and enlightened political leader—Prince Nasir —who would rather sell its country's oil to the Chinese so as to benefit his people. Of course, as we find out, Nasir is assassinated, his brother is crowned a puppet king, and Connex wins back, at the very last moments of the film, the oil refinery it lost to the Chinese at the beginning.

Here globalization means not only the expansion of capital all over the globe—nothing new— but the fact that the subordination of the political level to the economic one becomes *transparent*. These transparent relations are not limited to the Third World. For the film develops its conspiracy aspect in the way it sets up the relation between the economic and the political. That is, in order to legitimate the assassination of the prince, the U.S. must code him not as a legitimate economic rival, as the Chinese are, but as a political one. Thus, he is coded a "terrorist" and as such is wiped out by the CIA, an institution of the state.

If in *The Parallax View*[12] the "cover story" for capitalism is the "eccentric individual," the lone assassin, in *Syriana* the system has nowhere to hide. The "political" itself is used as the cover up. In other

words, what *Syriana* achieves with its interlocking stories, is to position the economic and political, the private and the public, in such a way that we witness the subsuming of the latter under the former. This pedagogy is also operative in the other major storyline where we witness, in a very schematic manner, the making of a terrorist and a terrorist attack. The film's most naïve moment traces direct trail that leads from capital's treatment of migrant workers to terrorism, that is, how economic conditions spur on the political. To say that *Syriana* is a film about globalization then suggests not that it imagines the role of U.S. interests in the Arab world, an imaginary dubbed "Anti-American" by Charles Krauthammer, but rather, more importantly, that it exposes the determinant relation between the economic and the political.[13]

Go to page 2

To top   Print version   JC 54   *Jump Cut* home

Bryan Woodward.

CIA as a business.

Connex-Kileen Merger.

But this observation needs to be nuanced further, for the *kind* ofdetermination that *Syriana* figures is its most valuable achievement. We can gauge this by reflecting on our subjective experience of the film. As I mentioned at the outset, one of the impressions people have after watching *Syriana* is that it is *too* complicated, ending up perhaps in mystifying our understanding of the relations between capital and politics. To acknowledge such an insight would set our film viewing in line with Jameson's understanding of the disorientation typical of the postmodern, expressed most vividly in his tour of the Bonaventure Hotel in downtown L.A.[14] [open endnotes in new window] But it is important to ask, "what is the source of the disorientation and what is its significance?"

Putting aside the limit of a viewer's capacity to gather important details offered only once and on the move, [15] I think the major source of disorientation on the plot level comes from the character of Dean Whiting. Whiting is the founder of Whiting and Sloan, the Washington law firm working for Connex that is charged with smoothing the merger between Connex and Killen. What is unique about Whiting's character is that he is the only character moving between the succession story in the Gulf and the Connex-Killen merger in the United States, that is, moving between the economic plot and the political one. During the first or even second and third viewings, Whiting's role remains opaque. But once we understand that he is the linchpin that ties the stories together, the film became very clear, perhaps even too clear. Whiting's character is opaque not only because his moves between the economic and political must unfold behind the scenes, but also because he seems to *embody*, as one character, both the private and the public interest.

Such close relations between the spheres surface several times throughout the film. Justifying bribing a Kazakhstan politician to obtain rights to drill in the Tangiez, Jimmy Pope, the owner of Killen explains,

> "China's economy isn't growing as fast as it could because they can't get the oil they need, and I am damn proud of that fact."[16]

To have the Chinese appear only under the sign of a national political adversary (we never learn of a specific Chinese oil firm) is one way the film encourages us to notice how the U.S. oil business is taking a patriotic "cover." Killen speaks as if the economic interests of an U.S. oil company are synonymous with those of the U.S. public at large. The most remarkable articulation of this conflation takes place at the end of the film when Bennet explains how the two spheres converge:

> "But this merger [between Connex and Killen] is so balance-positive for the American consumers that ultimately [the Department of] Justice wants it, the federal court wants it. Everybody wants it. Our real client is *US*, the American People and we're building *our* presence in Kazakhstan so we had to give them [Department of Justice] a little something

Dean Whiting.

Political assassination as office work.

Political assassination as office work 2.

Political assassination as office work 3.

meaningful and they got out of our way."[17]

Now this symptom to which *Syriana* seems to give form suggests that we might no longer be under the illusion that Marx identified with the rise of modern society, namely the separation of civil society from the state. In that historical moment, private interest was separated from public interest and consequently the political sphere proper (the state) was conceived of as autonomous and universal. However, to say "our real client is *US*, the American People and we're building *our* presence in Kazakhstan…" is then to suggest that this symbolic separation of spheres has broken down, that private interest has become the general interest.

I will not be able to offer a nuanced account of Marx's critique of the state, offered in his reading of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, but I would mention here one fundamental argument whose general familiarity will hopefully compensate for my abbreviated discussion of it. Key to Hegel's conception of the modern state is the separation he sets up between the domestic sphere, civil society (representing private interest) and the state, representing the general interest, which for Hegel is understood as universal. *Universal* here means that the state, although made up of people from civil society, is able to transcend private interest and represent the public or general interest. The state, for Hegel, is then a social embodiment of the universal. Marx begins to expose the contradiction inherent in the universality of the state, i.e., the political sphere, by putting his finger on the moment that delegates of private corporations[18] are elected for the national assembly:

> "Hegel began by regarding the representatives as representing the corporations, etc., but then introduces the further political determination to the effect that they should not vindicate the *particular interest* of the corporation, etc. He thereby nullifies his own definition, for he draws a dividing line between their *essential* determination as representatives and their *existence as part of a corporation*. Furthermore, he also cuts the corporation off from itself, from its own real content, for the corporation is supposed to elect deputies not from its own point of view but from the point of view of the state, i.e. it votes in its non-existence as corporation. Hegel thus acknowledges in the *material* determination what he denied *formally*, namely that civil society abstracts from itself at the moment of its political activity, and that its *political existence* is nothing but *this abstraction…* [the deputies] have authority as representative of *public* affairs, whereas in reality they represent *particular* interests."[19]

Marx argues here that Hegel disregards a contradiction between abstract form and content. The material determination of the delegates (their private interest) is obscured by a formal and symbolic structure (the political assembly) that is supposed to insure the leveling of private interest and the execution of the general or public interest. According to Marx, modern society, contrary to feudal society, is characterized with what could be called the fetishization or reification of the political into its own

Sydney Hewitt and Bennet Holiday.

Sidney Hewitt addresses Connex and Kileen.

The Assistant DA in a conversation with Bennett.

Wasim Kahn.

independent sphere.

Now it is easier to draw the distinction between the 1970s conspiracy films and 21st century globalization films such as *Syriana*. Conspiracy is not simply a structure of appearance and essence (the world of politics *appears* to be an independent sphere but in actuality it is only a shadow theatre for greater powers). It is also fundamentally grounded on the apparent symbolic *separation* of two (or more) social spheres. In the older conspiracy film, with the duration of the plot, that separation of spheres is finally revealed to be an illusion. This is why every conspiracy film is, in principle, akin to coming of age stories. Plot development is based on a fundamental moment of recognition of the Real (whether it is probable or not), a demystifying movement from the naivety of appearances to the harsh reality of life. Given a general presupposition of a symbolic separation between the private and the public, what characterizes conspiracy films is their attempt to show how one sphere *influences* or penetrates another. Indeed, the films' "dark" or sinister mood has something to do with the anxiety stemming from the source of influence being obscured, in the shadows. But, as a consequence of globalization we notice the erosion of this symbolic separation. i.e., that global corporations are weakening national borders and states' regulatory policies, as well as the increased financialization of every aspect of daily life which limits and contracts civil and political commitments. Thus, this movement of global integration now *fuses* the political and the economic such that it is no longer possible to talk about "influence" but rather about the *becoming economic of the political*.

Think here how Stan (William Hurt, the former CIA agent turned private consultant) explains to Bob how the CIA is an inefficient 30 billion dollar business, how private consulting is much better ("the same job but it pays better"). All of a sudden, as we notice how the CIA agents (Fred, Terry, the Division Chief) insisting that Bob learn how to be a good office person they begin to change their political colors and emit those signs more typical of corporate executives. What is so remarkable in the way Gaghan shoots the room from which the CIA orders a missile launch to kill Nasir is that its *mise en scene* emit not the sinister connotation of a secret assassination, but the dreariness and grayness typical of routine office work. The significance of Dean Whiting's shifting between narrative and symbolic levels can now also be explained as that narrative expression indicating not so much the influence of "special interests" on politics but the convergence of the two spheres. This is also the source of the viewer's disorientation— feeling unable to understand who is behind what, who works for whom. I suggest that such viewer confusion comes not from the plot's mystifying social relations, but precisely from making the two spheres indistinguishable. In one of the most important scenes of the film, keyed to the Faustian pact, we witness a meeting between a businessman, Dean Whiting, and the would-be King, Prince Meshal (Akbar Kurtha):

> Businessman: "Capitalism cannot exist without waste. This is why we should write thank you notes to Mr. Whiting and the USA for producing one quarter of the world's garbage and one quarter of the demand.

> Whiting: You are certainly welcomed; our pleasure, really. (To Meshal): Prince, is there anything we can do for you?
>
> Prince Meshal: Americans are always happy to drill holes in other peoples' countries. I heard of you, Mr. Whiting: the cat's paw of the Saudi princes.
>
> Whiting: As far as I can see you could use a bit of the cat's paw yourself. Second- born son, so beaten down by his family he can't even tell me what he wants when he's asked straight out. A grown-up baby, who is afraid of his brother and maybe wants to be king. Maybe? Well, prince, are you a king? Can you tell me what you want?" [20]

See how Whiting is figured as both capital and political power so much so that at this point, at least in first viewing, it is unclear who he is exactly. And how can a Washington lawyer can offer the crown to a Saudi prince? And indeed, although Meshal remains silent, we witness in the following scene the launching of the first assassination attempt against Prince Nasir. Gaghan has a keen, even if a bit awestruck understanding of the significance of Whiting when he talks of the real-life equivalent of Whiting who served him as an inspiration:

> "it's interesting that these men [like Whiting] can represent inside one law firm... Saudi Arabia, and an oil company, a military contract and be the private lawyer of a senator and it's one nexus at this point..."[21]

Globalization debates are usually split on whether the phenomenon is recent or the result of long term developments.[22] While critics of the term remind us that capital was always global,[23] I would like to suggest that although capital's *material* determinations might be said to remain constant, its global ubiquity and its simultaneity seem to be affecting its *symbolic* forms (in Marx's words, the "abstractions") such that capital seems to erode the hold of appearances it itself put in place at earlier moments. In other words, globalization seems to accomplish what had been the task of critique, that is, bringing into unity what was reified and separated, only now this unification takes place not in thought but in reality.

To say all this differently and in an abbreviated fashion will be to say that global integration means that we witness the unification of the different levels of social life into a single one, the economic. If this is the case, and I only speculate here, it could go some way in explaining the intricacy of *Syriana's* multiple storylines. Both the 1970s conspiracy films and *Syriana* are charged, as it were, with finding a form for the relation between the political and the economic. In the earlier moment, since the appearance of the separation of the private and public was still real (hence our naivety could be shattered), a conspiracy film's energies were invested solely in bringing together the reified elements. In *Syriana*, given the erosion of the apparent separation of the spheres (hence our apathy), the film must invest as much energies in separating them and placing them in the far distant edges of the globe so to be able to tell its story of convergence.

To conclude, I would like briefly to consider one alternative explanation to my reading. It is possible that the transparency of the relation between the political and the economic has something to do with the fact that *Syriana* is ultimately a film about the decline of U.S. hegemony and China's

ascendancy. It is important to note at this point how the only actors remaining in the dark are the Chinese. Although their presence is as at the heart of the film, they remain quite unknown to us.[24] It is possible then that the structural power shift between the United States and China induces a crisis that renders the relation between the political and the economic transparent.[25] Marx's theory of crisis, although attending more immediately to the production process proper, could be said to be pertinent here in explaining the unity between seemingly independent spheres:

> "*Crisis* is nothing but the forcible assertion of the unity of phases of the production process which have become independent of each other."[26]

In our case, the crisis exposes the unity of the economic and the political. [27] This will suggest that what I called the convergence of the spheres is not a new stage or an attribute of globalization but simply an effect of a crisis whose termination might bring us back to the former separation of spheres. While this might be the case, it raises questions as to the length of crises and to their enduring effects.

In his 1977 reflections on the Brecht-Lukács debate, Jameson concluded his essay envisioning a new realism, one that would

> "resist the power of reification in consumer society and reinvent that category of totality, which, systematically undermined by existential fragmentation on all levels of life and social organization today, can alone project structural relations between classes as well as between class struggles in other countries, in what has increasingly become a world system."[28]

In films like *Syriana*, it might be the case that globalization itself prepares the conditions for the reassertion of the category of totality.

Go to Notes page

Notes

1. Philip Dhingra Blog, "The Tangled Web of Syriana," August, 2006, http://www.philosophistry.com/specials/syriana
[return to page 1]

2. Fredric Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (Bloomington/London: Indiana University Press/BFI, 1992), 9.

3. Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*: *A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge: MIT, 1971), 56, 60.

4. Interview with Charlie Rose on December 9th 2005, 9:20-9:35. http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-8614857235768787439

5. For Louis Althusser on totality see, Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (London/New York: Verso, 2005), especially, 87-127. For a reading of Jacques Lacan's concept of the Real see Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London/New York: Verso, 2008), especially, 190-196.

6. Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, 45-6.

7. Jameson, "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," *Social Text* 15 (1986): 65-88.

8. By primary scenes I mean that they express as such the social antagonism itself very much like a primal scene is the moment where sexual relations appear as such and not in a displaced manner. See for example the following scenes: 0:17:42 - 0:18:15 (CIA); 0:39:50 – 0:41:15 (Islam); 1:16:56 – 1:19:02 (Nasir-Bryan); 1:22:10 – 1:23:00 (Dalton).

9. "It's a film in design like films of the seventies in that they were willing to discuss geo-political issues without pointing a finger directly at a specific person." George Clooney, *Making of Syriana*, 0:22 – 0:34. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0kkJsLN1f54

10. Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, 67.

11. For example, the conspiracy to assassinate a political candidate in *The Parallax View* although dealing with political content is in fact, according to Jameson, a displaced figure for corporate structures. The obverse works for David Cronenberg's *Videodrome*, where corporate competition serves as an

allegory for political power. See Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic.*

12. *The Parallax View*, directed by Alan J. Pakula (1974; Los Angeles, CA: Paramount, 1999), DVD.

13. Charls Kruathammer, "Oscars for Osama," *Washington Post* (3.3.2006).

14. See Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 38-45. [return to page 2]

15. For example the exact relation between Danny Dalton and Killen; who are the characters representing Connex and who Killen; how Iran fits the larger network of American interests and other details.

16. Stephen Gaghan, *Syriana*, 1:42:07 – 1:42:13.

17. Gaghan, *Syriana* screenplay, p. 114, emphasis in original. In film: 1:47: 37 – 1:48: 03.

18. It is important to note that Hegel's 19th century understanding of corporations (in German : *Korporation*] is both similar and different than ours. They are similar in the sense that they are firms that are guided by private interest, but they did not enjoy some of the later legal reforms, beginning in the late 19th century, limiting their liability and regarding them as "people." For Hegel's discussion of the corporation see his *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 224-228.

19. Karl Marx, "Critique of Hegel's Doctrine of the State," in *Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Roger Benton (London: Penguin, 1992), 193-4, emphasis in original.

20. Gaghan, *Syriana*, 0:41:46 – 0:43:15.

21. Interview with Charlie Rose on December 9th 2005, 13:10-13:25. http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-8614857235768787439.

22. See for example David Held and Anthony McGrew "The Great Globalization Debate: An Introduction." In *The Global Transformations Reader*: *An Introduction to the Globalization Debate 2nd Edition*, edited by David Held and Anthony McGrew (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2003), 1-50; Fredric Jameson, "Globalization as a Philosophical Issue." In *Valences of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 2009), 435-455.

23. See for example Neil Larsen's critique of the concept, "Theory Risk: Reflections on 'Globalization Theory' and the Crisis in Argentina," *The New Centennial Review* 3.2 (2003): 23-40.

24. The Chinese are the chief reason Connex fails to win Nasir's contract, which pushes them to merge with Killen. On the other hand, they contribute indirectly to the laying off of Wasim and to Nasir being assassinated.

25. I thank Neil Larsen for suggesting to me the importance of crisis as a

moment where essence and appearance can be said to overlap.

26. Karl Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value*, ed. S. Ryazanskaya. trans. Renate Simpson (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1969) vol. 2, 509, emphasis in original. See also,

> "If, for example, purchase and sale—or the metamorphosis of commodities—represent the unity of two processes, or rather the movement of one process through two opposite phases, and thus essentially the unity of the two phases, the movement is essentially just as much the separation of these two phases and their becoming independent of each other. Since, however, they belong together, the independence of the two correlated aspects can only *show itself* forcibly, as a destructive process. It is just the *crisis* in which they assert their unity, the unity of the different aspects. The independence which these two linked and complimentary phases assume in relation to each other is forcibly destroyed. Thus the crisis manifests the unity of the two phases that have become independent of each other. There would be no crisis without this inner unity of factors that are apparently indifferent to each other..." — Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value*, vol. 2, 500, emphasis in original.

27. Naomi Klein discusses a similar subordination of public interest to economic private interest in her analysis of the Bush administration. See, *The Shock Doctrine*: *The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007), especially 308-322.

28. Jameson, "Reflections on the Brecht Lukács-Debate," in *The Ideologies of Theory: Essays 1971-1986, vol. 2, Syntax and History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 146.

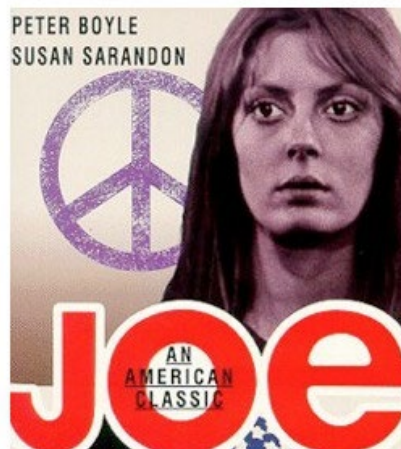# A working-class hero is something to be: class in 70s U.S. cinema

by Peter Steven

Review of Derek Nystrom's *Hard Hats, Rednecks, and Macho Men: Class in 1970s American Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).
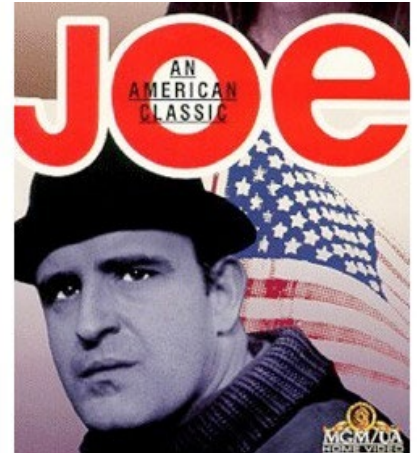
Part one: a visual essay

Manhattan's "Hard-hat riots" of May 1970 featured construction workers, a sea of American flags, and signs reading "Impeach the Red Mayor."


Joe, directed by John Avildsen in 1970, launched the decade with a reactionary and violent tale that managed to exploit the animosity between so-called "hard-hats" and the anti-war movement. ...
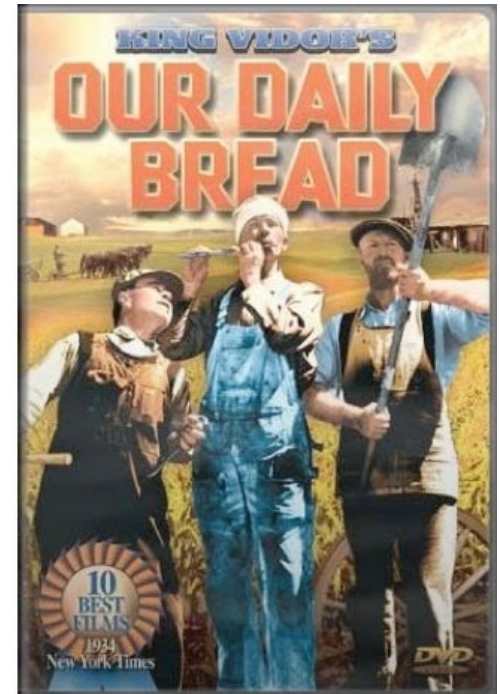

... The film shifted the debate about the war, then raging within the Professional Middle Class, onto class conflicts, pitting a bitter, angry, blue collar man against hippies and young people of 'privilege.'

Sociologists Barbara and John Ehrenreich noted the media's dubious notion in the 1970s of "working-class authoritarianism."

Derek Nystrom argues that the leadership of Hollywood's old blue-collar unions, centered in NABET, were proud of their work in *Joe*. In part, they identified with the character and perhaps saw parallels with the young-brat directors dismissive of Hollywood's methods of standardized filmmaking.
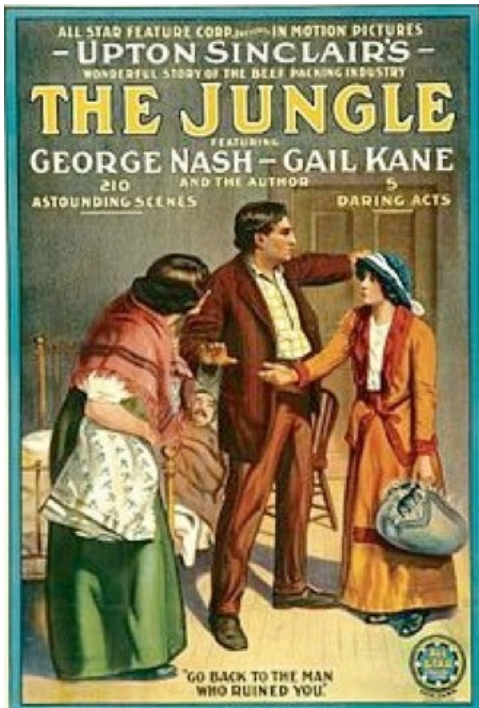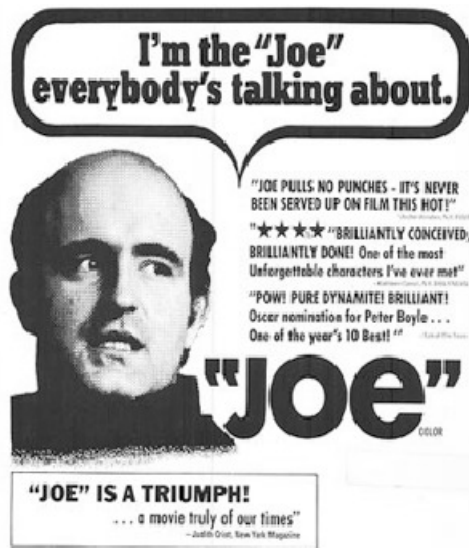
D.W. Griffith's *A Corner in Wheat* (1909) tells an eloquent story of how capitalist speculation in food prices affects the working-class. In Griffith's melodramatic style, the Wheat King falls into his grain silo and is buried alive.

The Jungle (1914) based on Upton Sinclair's famous 1906 novel, dramatized the life of Chicago's meat-packing workers, most of whom were immigrants. The film is lost.

Our Daily Bread (1934) by King Vidor, one of Hollywood's best directors, remains one of the very few films in dominant cinema to depict collective labor. This poster gives it a comic look but the film was remarkably serious and positive toward the workers' efforts.

Working-class women occasionally got sympathetic treatment in the 30s and 40s. Hollywood stars, such as Barbara Stanwyck, Bette Davis, and Sylvia Sydney, often sought out such roles because the characters provided more dramatic material.

Barbara Stanwyck as a working woman on the way up in *Stella Dallas* (King Vidor, 1937). In contrast to the previous shot, here she receives the full Hollywood glamor lighting.

In 1934 John Qualen and Paul Muni played mine workers desperate to organize in Michael Curtiz's *Black Fury*. Qualen made a specialty of playing slightly comic though dignified Scandinavians from the 1930s through the 1950s.

Butterfly McQueen didn't get much choice in roles. Here, as often, she plays a comic maid, in *Mildred Pierce* (1945).

Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936) created brilliant, now iconic images of 20th century factory work. This famous shot illustrates alienation, speed-up, and that cog-in-the-wheel feeling.

Salt of the Earth (Herbert Biberman, 1954), produced by blacklisted Hollywood veterans, remains significant for its multi-racial cast, its revolutionary politics, and its emphasis on women in the working-class.

Burt Reynolds specialized in a new working-class sub-genre of the 70s, the "Southern."

In *Five Easy Pieces* (Bob Rafelson, 1970) Jack Nicholson flees his life of privilege as a concert pianist to try his hand within the working-class as an oil rigger. The film uses Nicholson's rough, often crudely sexist, depiction of an oil worker as a foil to his character's upbringing—sensitive, artistic, and caring.

Sylvester Stallone's Rocky Balboa became one of the most recognizable working-class heroes of the 70s. This scene early in *Rocky* (1976) shows him in a Philadelphia neighbourhood store awkwardly talking to the clerk, played by Talia Shire. Both are depicted in this cluttered, hemmed-in environment as unfashionable ugly ducklings. His boxing dreams may provide a way of getting out.

In *F.I.S.T.* (Norman Jewison, 1978) Stallone combines his trademark scenes of violence ...
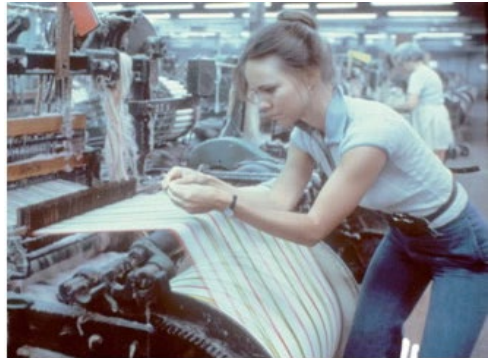
... with a sympathetic portrait of industrial union organizing.

Were these working-class characters of the 1970s best understood as products of middle-class fantasy about that class?

Sally Field's portrayal of a southern textile worker in *Norma Rae* was directed by the veteran left-winger Martin Ritt, in 1979. Nystrom argues that the film ...

... "served as a politicized recasting of the Southern's narrative and setting." Some reviewers at the time derided the film for dwelling on the romantic, extra-marital, sub-plot involving a northern (Jewish) labor organizer played by Ron Leibman. Field's other Southern character of the period made her ...

... a side-kick, along-for-the-ride extra to Burt Reynolds in *Smokey and the Bandit* (1977). The film launched a blue-collar outlaw-trucking cycle, mostly set in the South. Many of the films featured new strains of country music sung by angry white men and lyrics such as "Take this job and shove it."

Nystrom argues that along with *Norma Rae*, the comic fantasy *9 to 5* (Colin Higgins, 1980) offered one of the better representations of working-women at the time. The clever casting of Dolly Parton, Lily Tomlin, and Jane Fonda, icons of country music, TV, and film helped the film become very popular, even in the face of fierce hostility from male critics.

Blue Collar, directed by Paul Schrader in 1978, portrayed auto workers in Detroit with sympathy and some nuance. Uncharacteristically, two of its three leads were African American. ...
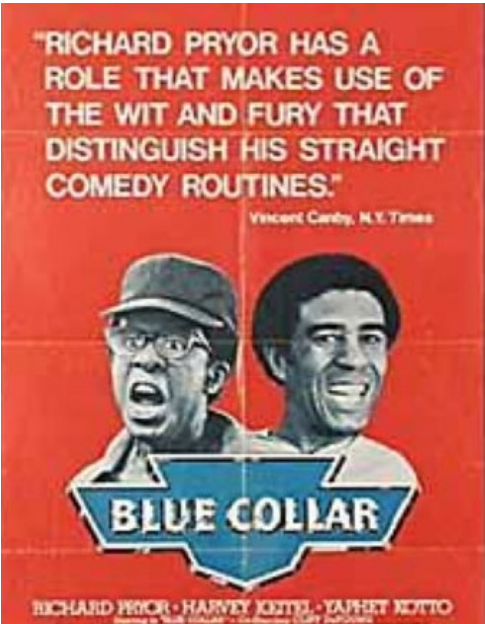
... Conventionally it blamed the auto union as much as management for the men's troubles. In the film Richard Pyror created the most complex character of his career.

In *Saturday Night Fever*, one of the 70s biggest hits, John Travolta quits his job in a paint store in order to escape Brooklyn, become a disco dancer, and cross the bridge into Manhattan. ...

... Tony Manero's coiffed hair and white polyester suit reflected an authentic Brooklyn working-class subculture at odds with the predominant dressing down of middle-class youth.

Where are the studies of
w-c audiences
in today's film scholarship?

A working-class hero is something to be:
class in 70s U.S. cinema

review by Peter Steven

Derek Nystrom. *Hard Hats, Rednecks, and Macho Men: Class in 1970s American Cinema*
(New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

Around mid-day, on May 8, 1970, a small contingent of anti-Vietnam war demonstrators set up for a rally near the corner of Wall and Broad Streets in downtown Manhattan.[1] [open endnotes in new window] Several hundred, perhaps one thousand, had gathered. Eyewitnesses noted that, as usual, the majority was college students, but the group also contained the young, the middle-aged, and the old. During the speeches and chants, the demonstration was suddenly attacked—not by the police—but by a raging, nasty group dominated by hard-hatted construction workers, wielding lead pipes and crowbars. They called themselves patriotic and said they supported the Vietnam war; mostly they were incensed by the "desecration of the American flag," which sometimes occurred at these events.[2]

The media had arrived as well. Right off they could see the news scoop at hand. They dubbed it the "Hard Hat Riots" and their fellow editors, columnists, and big thinkers were off to the races. Here certainly was a trend. The U.S. working-class was turning to the Right. The Sixties was over.

Later, witnesses came forward to point out that the "hard hat" convergence was not as spontaneous as first appeared—many had been bused in by conservative unions and the attack was well-coordinated. Also, many of the "patriots" turned out to be white-collar office workers on their lunch break, eager for some excitement. But the media frame was set. Blue-collar men, especially those with traditional jobs and values had been over-looked for too long.[3] Hollywood wasn't far behind.

The movie industry has depicted working people since its earliest days. Viewers have seen coal miners, farmers, waitresses, truck drivers, fishers, maids, secretaries, and even union leaders. Some decades, like the 20s,

30s, and 40s featured more of these people. Others, like the 50s and 60s pushed blue-collar types to the side. Then, for a few years in the 1970s, working-class characters suddenly re-appeared in a few notable film cycles.

Why was that? This is the first question that Derek Nystrom addresses in his rich and provocative book, *Hard Hats, Rednecks, and Macho Men*. The answer, he believes, stems from the needs of middle-class audiences to allay their fears of a rapidly changing world. For these viewers, blue-collar men in traditional occupations, with their accompanying values and garb, provided fantasies of stability. Despite changes in gender relations and generational attitudes, wrenching adjustments within the work-world, and the country's shifting economic regions, some groups of men remained straight-forward, thus reassuring—even desirable.

How were these audiences, filmmakers, and critics using working-class characters and situations to provide entertainment, draw inspiration, and dispel fears about a changing world? Why, asks Nystrom, were white working-class men suddenly discovered and found appealing in the 1970s?

Such questions compel Nystrom and his readers to accept a class analysis of U.S. society, something that film studies has rarely addressed. He admits the complexity of defining such a working-class, beyond the obvious blue-collar occupations in industry and service work. Equally difficult is the drawing of boundaries for the middle-class. If, for example, we base the analysis on a person's relation to the major means of production, most of the U.S. population would qualify as working-class. But if we look at persons in managerial positions, whose role is to enforce existing relations of production between owners and workers, a significant middle-class takes shape and clear differences emerge between these classes. For Nystrom, the work of Barbara and John Ehrenreich provides the best model for tackling these questions and for his purposes. The Ehrenreichs argue that the middle-class is a separate entity best defined as a Professional Managerial Class (PMC). This approach, they emphasize, shows that the PMC has an "objectively antagonistic" relationship to the working class (pp. 9-12).[4]

An analysis of class such as this gives Nystrom the basis for discussing how PMC audiences looked from a distance at working-class characters, with a

> "fascination that was marked by anxiety, but also desire; repulsion, but also attraction; condescension, but also identification (p. 157).

Hollywood had economic problems of its own. The breakup of the old studio system in the 1950s gave more power to independent, often maverick producers, and by the 1960s a round of near bankruptcies ushered in conglomerate ownership—groups with no clue about moviemaking. This was matched by a catastrophic decline in audiences, particularly young people. A panic mode of this sort required new approaches, perhaps even a different type of filmmaking.

There were two New Hollywoods. The first stretched from the late 1960s to

the late 1970s and can be glimpsed in a set of films based partially on a European art-house aesthetic, some directed by young, film school grads and others by old hands, such as Arthur Penn, from TV, and Martin Ritt, a survivor of left-liberal Hollywood. This first New Hollywood featured adult content, various strains of realism (sex, violence, and odd locations), unmotivated heroes, and smallish budgets, exemplified by *Bonnie and Clyde, Easy Rider, Five Easy Pieces,* and their ilk. The commercial goal was to uncover niche markets composed of those young audiences who had disappeared.

The second New Hollywood, soon to gain dominance, staked its claim on big-budget blockbusters, spectacle, fantasy, old-time genres, and action heroes with conservative values, epitomized by *Jaws* (1975), *Star Wars* (1977), and *ET* (1982). The creators of this second strategy understood equally that the return of young audiences provided the key to future success. But as the 1980s ground on it became clear that with this strategy young viewers now meant the under twenty-fives, not simply liberal arts students schooled in the cinema of Bergman and Godard. The emphasis had shifted dramatically from realism to spectacle. With *Star Wars* and similar fare on its heels, protagonists became cartoon heroes, flaunting retro values but with a knowing post-modern wink to the audience.

Nystrom's focus is the first New Hollywood, a phenomenon that found a place for working-class characters and stories, but an approach almost entirely swept away by the second in the 1980s. These were broad trends, of course, and film scholars debate the characteristics, timing, and economics of these changes in the industry. Regardless, the movie business still values a few small-scale realist dramas in their yearly lineups, featuring specific locations and more mature subject-matter, the type of fare launched through festivals, like Sundance, such as Whit Stillman's *Last Days of Disco* (1998), Fred Schepisi's *Empire Falls* (2008), and Kelly Reichardt's *Wendy and Lucy* (2008).

Nystrom takes us back to three significant film cycles, all of which emerged in the 1970s: the Youth-culture drama, the Southern, and the New Night-Life cycle. For the Youth-culture drama, the breakthrough came with Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider* (1969), which, as Nystrom demonstrates, depicts working people as the enemy—directly opposed to the new youth counter-cultures. In most of these films Hollywood

> "found the categories of 'youth' and 'worker' to be mutually exclusive" (p. 52).

Later hits of the decade included *Five Easy Pieces,* which unlike the exploitation roots of *Easy Rider,*led its audience into art-house terrain. In each case, youth seemed to have nothing in common with their parents or any of the prevailing ideals of the mainstream. For Nystrom, these films reflect a PMC anxiety about "class reproduction." How was the country to continue if its youth rejected their place in society, whether as workers or managers.

From the nightmare of *Deliverance* (1972) to the backroad hi-jinks of

Smokey and the Bandit, Convoy, White Line Fever and dozens of others, the new Southern cycle pulled audiences into the strange world of the New South. Parts of that world had been glimpsed before, especially in the 1930s, with hillbillies, chain gangs, and the dirt farmers of King Vidor's *Our Daily Bread* (1934). Other elements were embryonic, depicted as the new growth and cultural strains of the South. How, ponders Nystrom, did the nasty old redneck get transformed into the good ole boy depicted in the Southern cycle? Who in the world had asked for Burt Reynolds?

He was invented. Partly through wishful thinking among the middle class, says Nystrom, and partly as a reflection of the "easy-going," non-union workers who made up the film crews for these on-location productions. This labor ambience differed greatly from the old, well-organized unions then prevailing in Hollywood. How fitting that Smokey and his pals make their money as independent big-rig drivers, hauling Coors beer, the non-union product par excellence. The cycle's popularity stemmed from the films' ability to create a "spectacle of free-wheeling resistance" (p. 157), embodied by stars such as Reynolds or Kris Kristofferson with an easy charm and a veneer of blue-collar aura. These southerners might have been throwbacks but they were not uneducated or mean.

If the Youth and Southern cycles featured eccentric and far-fetched personalities, glimpsed from a distance by PMC audiences, the New Night-life films struck closer to home. These characters could induce real fear. *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* (Brooks, 1977) and *Cruising* (Friedkin, 1980), for example, took place in familiar city streets and created scenes from daily life. For Nystrom, these films and many others, reflected a PMC attraction to male bodies, coupled with a confusion about the cultural signals needed by youth to navigate the urban world. Some people you'd meet were working-class, some were not; some were gay, many were not; some dressed naturally in blue-collar garb, others adopted it as a costume. Some were easy-going; many were violent, even dangerous. Perhaps then, representations of the traditional blue-collar character set in motion a nostalgic longing for a simpler world where values and desires seemed less complex.

Yet, the attraction to these working-class bodies might also represent an excitement and physicality missing in so much urban white-collar work. Just as the characters played by Diane Keaton in *Goodbar* and Al Pacino in *Cruising* searched for urban excitement, so too might their audiences. Nystrom works hard to redeem the universally loathed *Cruising,* suggesting that the film's narrative and shifting points-of-view reveal a valid and sophisticated attempt to challenge viewer's prejudices. He also sympathizes with the film's gay extras who

> "seemed to have accomplished ... an affiliation of gay male identity with not only traditional signifiers of masculinity but also a polymorphous exploration of bodily pleasure" (p. 153).

In other words, the filmmakers tried to create a dark and scary world; the extras made it fun and appealing. Later Night-life hits of the decade, especially Badham's *Saturday Night Fever* (1977), the most profitable by

far, drew on an up-tempo, feel-good genre, and these films showed in different ways the attraction to a white ('ethnic') male character, in this case slightly tragic and hardly threatening.

Nystrom argues throughout that film scholars have ignored issues of class. In contrast, he finds it everywhere, even in violent crime films ostensibly centered only on gender trouble. This may be admirable but it pulls him far from the central issues of social class. His discussion of *Goodbar* and *Cruising* take us into the world of working-class costumes and role-playing, as enacted by middle-class professionals and police. This gives us PMC characters playing out the fantasies of PMC audiences.

The book ends with a discussion of three films that stand out as exceptions: *Blue Collar* (Schrader, 1978) *Norma Rae* (Ritt, 1979), and *9 to 5* (Higgins, 1980). Nystrom argues that, despite their faults, these provide a more nuanced and conscious treatment of working-class lives. All three take us beyond the stereotypes about traditional blue-collar men, to feature women and African American characters. All three not only depict working people but also shape their dramas around class conflict. (Who would have thought in the 1970s that this would be the last time these themes appeared in Hollywood cinema, now some thirty years later?)

Nystrom's discussion of contemporary mainstream and leftist critiques of these three films replays the ongoing debates concerning individual versus class narratives and about the role of comedy or romance fiction in political cinema. *Norma Rae*, for instance, was criticized for its focus on a single worker, rather than the group, and for the romance elements that threaten to upstage the class conflict. Similarly, some reviewers felt that the broad generic elements of crime story and comedy seriously weakened *Blue Collar* and *9 to 5*. The book brings a nuanced and open-minded analysis to the films and their critics. Here, in particular, he moves away from a largely text-based analysis to imagine various class-based audience responses.

Nystrom states that his focus is the PMC audience and how it viewed depictions of the working class on-screen. Likewise, he focuses on middle-class filmmakers and their journalist class equivalents who write for the dominant media. Fair enough.

As interesting, useful, even important as these questions may be, I question why the book completely excludes a discussion of working-class audiences. I understand that you don't criticize a book on the fall of Rome because the author neglects Greece. But surely Nystrom owes us a short discussion on this missing element. He spends considerable time teasing out the possible reactions among PMC viewers to characters such as Tony, in *Saturday Night Fever,* Jerry, in *Blue Collar,* and Bandit, in *Smokey and the Bandit*, as played, respectively, by John Travolta, Harvey Keitel, and Burt Reynolds. Does it not also beg the question as to how working people would react to such characters?

We could argue that in the United States the dominant culture is a middle-class culture, made by and for PMC audiences. In this formulation, the working-class remains on the sidelines to pick up the scraps that also apply

or appeal to them. But surely, none of the culture industries in their frenzy for profits can afford to ignore the majority of Americans, its working-class, for either commercial or ideological reasons. Even with Nystrom's emphasis on PMC viewers, which, to repeat, provides a fruitful and fascinating line of inquiry, it would seem useful at some points to compare, theoretically if not empirically, how—based on their class position—viewers might diverge in their understanding of and response to working-class characters on screen

In 1977, when I first started writing about *Saturday Night Fever,* I wondered how a working-class viewer would react to the film's representation of upward mobility, neighborhoods, education, and even dance. Unfortunately, Nystrom doesn't help us with that query. This missing element also seems notable in his catalogue of reasons as to why workers were "discovered" by Hollywood in the early 70s. The list includes several plausible reasons based on changing gender roles in the workplace and elsewhere, and the challenge to PMC mores from new social and gender movements. At other points he talks about working-class agency itself, as manifest in new workplace relations, extraordinary strike activity in the early 70s, and supposed authoritarian turn among workers, exemplified by the hard hats. Nonetheless, he states that while

> "these depictions of white, blue-collar men were in many ways influenced by visible activities of the actual working class, the film characters are best understood as products of middle-class fantasy about that class" (p. x).

Another fruitful but underdeveloped line of enquiry traces the changes in Hollywood's labor system and how these may have been mirrored in the films. He notes, for example, that the breakdown of the centralized studio system prompted some producers to decamp for new types of location shooting. This gave us, for example, the various Southern cycles, featuring good ole boys, Georgia scenery, and ubiquitous blue-highway car chases. He also believes that some youthful directors, anxious to experiment in New-Wave-type styles, ran up against the old-guard in Hollywood's hierarchical unions. The media mind-set of youth versus the working-class would thus be easy for these filmmakers to adopt.

A coda takes up an intriguing parallel between the 1970s and the many film depictions of class and 'honest' work after September 11, 2001. These reveal two moments when blue-collar workers of lower Manhattan were re-discovered and valorized for their valuable labor—building the World Trade Center in the 70s and clearing away its rubble after 9/11. But the spate of 9/11 films has centered on fire and emergency workers; filmmakers have neglected the opportunity to expand into other stories of working-class life.

Aside from this longitudinal analysis, I would hope that Nystrom will continue his study and step back from the minutia of U.S. cinema to compare Hollywood's working-class cycles of the 70s with parallel trends depicting working-class characters in, for starters, Britain, Canada, and Italy. Think, for instance of the many productions of Ken Loach and Tony

Garnet, in England, Bill Forsyth in Scotland, Don Shebib's *Goin' Down the Road*, in Canada, Lina Wertmuller's absurdist class-comedies in Italy. All this blue-collar fascination was hardly limited to the fantasies, needs, and nostalgia of the U.S. managerial class.

Is there anything left of these cycles and sub-genres in 2012? Amid all the *Avengers*, *Hunger Games,* and *Kung Fu Pandas*, does Hollywood seriously depict working-class characters today? The answer is no. Occasionally, a few examples break in from the margins, but that's hardly a noticeable trend or enough success to trigger a commercial cycle. Rarer still is a film that moves beyond class depiction to class conflict. John Sayles stands out as a director who reminds us of the class dimension in any subject he tackles, but it's been many years since he has depicted class conflict head-on. A few British imports take up class conflict, such as Ken Loach's *Bread and Roses* (2000), on the Justice for Janitors campaign in Los Angeles, and Nigel Cole's 2010 comedy, *Made in Dagenham,* which earned decent reviews. But these never managed wide release.

Perhaps it was just a fad of the 1970s, like disco and mullets. Nystrom's thoughtful book drew me back to those far-away years to wonder again what brought those characters to the screen. Who were the people who created these stories? What were the conditions that granted them some success?

Go to Notes page

Notes

1. This is approximately three blocks south of Zuccotti Park, the center of New York's Occupy Movement in the fall of 2011. [return to essay]

2. For a useful website on these events, see "The Hard Hat Riots: An Online History Project,"
http://chnm.gmu.edu/hardhats/homepage.html.
The site contains newspaper articles, photos, and study questions for analyzing the events. It was compiled by history students at New York University.

3. One conservative blogger has wondered why Martin Scorcese hasn't made a film about the hard hat riots. Indeed.

4. See, in particular, Barbara Ehrenreich's *The Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class."* New York: HarperCollins, 1983.
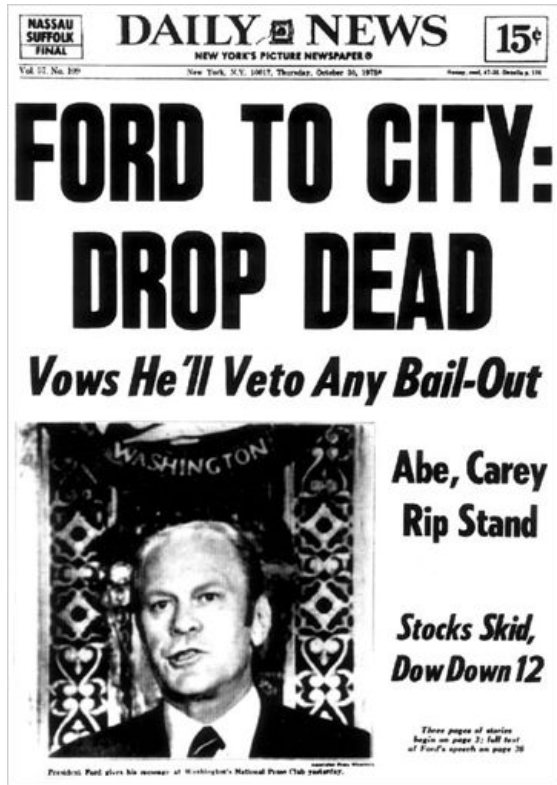

The *New York Daily News* marks the nadir of the city's financial fortunes. This can also be seen as the transitional moment in the city's economic history.

The restored Kaufman Astoria Studios show the rebirth of New York as a production center, an effect of and a cause for increased use as a

Performing the new economy: New York, neoliberalism, and mass communication in late 1970s cinema

by Stanley Corkin

This essay treats a group of films shot primarily in New York City from 1976 to 1980 that focus substantially on the entertainment industry. Since the 2011 publication of my book, *Starring New York: Filming the Grime and Glamour of the Long 1970s,* I have further considered the image and idea of New York in films of that era.[1] [open endnotes in new window] In this essay I extend my discussion to consider these films' historical salience as they articulate an emergent network of globalized commerce and communication. In historical retrospect, the films seem prescient in their definition of that city as a global center. They also anticipate its further depiction in film and television, whether in the *Sex and the City* franchise (television 1998-2004, films in 2008 and 2010), the very popular *Mad Men* (television 2007-), *Bright Lights, Big City* (1988), even Spike Lee's under-rated *Bamboozled* (2000). All these media fictions point to the city becoming or just about to become a place that plays a certain kind of role in world system of entertainment commerce that is dependent on far flung networks of communication

The productions I consider include *Network* (1976), *Saturday Night Fever* (1977), *New York, New York* (1977), *All that Jazz* (1979), and *Fame* (1980). I am particularly interested in their historically situated depiction of relative space. As any number of cultural geographers— from Henri Lefebvre to David Harvey to Neil Smith—have elaborated, space itself is an elastic concept; it is organized in relation to any number of historical factors.[2] Indeed, Lefebvre insists that space itself cannot be conceived as other than a social category.[3] Space is a vital representational category in all films but particularly enters the narrative of these since they are about the relation between relative proximity and relative effect. Indeed, the way these films articulate discrete and related spaces provides a conceptual map of connections between New York and a range of proximate and far-flung locales.

In considering such spatial relations, I am particularly interested in the way these films articulate a historically-situated depiction of

relative space. While I am not proposing a naïvely realist reading strategy, I am making a case for the historicity of these visual texts. As Philip Rosen insightfully asserts in his *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), documentation always entails representation since we have no privileged access to the thing itself. However, relative degrees of mediation exist between represented objects and the thing itself. Towards clarifying distinctive strategies of documentation, Rosen contrasts "preservation" and "restoration," and his distinction has relevance both for a critic discussing a text's relation to the past and for a filmmaker plotting how to represent that relation. Film cannot restore the remnants of the past and make them a vital, if ersatz, testimony to the qualities of that object and era. It can, however, in a variety of ways—visual, aural, verbal—re-elaborate a memory of that materiality and embed it in a narrative that apparently evokes the fact of the past.

More salient is film's ability to preserve, a quality consonant with the nature of film technology and visible at its inception in the late nineteenth century. Given the status of films as works that are explicitly *of* the period they depict, they tend to act to preserve their moment of conception and production, even as they appear, from the vantage point of the 2000s, to restore a moment now in the historical past. As a critic attempting to elaborate a historical moment and to articulate relations between these objects of mass culture and a network of other cultural and social factors, my concern focuses mostly on how they represent and seem to preserve a period of time in textual form.[4]

Furthermore, since space can be understood as a plastic concept, its representation would of course be sensitive to historical currents. To take the time and locale I am considering here, New York City in the 1970s was very much a locale in flux as its relative connections to proximate and far-flung locales shifted. These films were shot in the years after 1975, which saw New York's default on its bond payments, an event famously documented in a headline in the New York *Daily News* about the federal government's unwillingness to assist:

> "[President Gerald] Ford to City: Drop Dead."[5]

The default marked the nadir of the city's fortunes and its new recasting into a "world city" in the service of globalized trade and neoliberal governance. Through an analysis of these films, I will inquire both into the terms of that "rebirth" and the role of popular culture in its delineation, as well as provide a broader discussion of the ways these films map the relative spaces of the city and the relation of certain discrete spaces to a world beyond.

New York's prominence in these films did not just come about because of a shift in world commerce. After 1966, and particularly after 1969, New York City served as a major site of film production. The reasons for this came about because of a way that film history intersected with urban history. New York City had declined as a manufacturing center in the 1950s and 1960s and also experienced a related flight of the middle class. As a consequence, the prospect of meeting the city's considerable financial obligations appeared particularly daunting for

successive New York City mayors. When the liberal John Lindsay was elected in 1966, then, one of his early acts was to create the Mayor's Office of Film, Theater, and Broadcasting.[6]

Prior to Lindsay's initiative, location shoots in New York City for major Hollywood productions were bureaucratically forbidding. Producers were run through a maze of offices in search of multiple permits, and then faced high policing costs, further expenditure in bribes, and various other types of corruption. James Sanders tells us that in 1965 only two features were shot in New York in their entirety. The new Mayor's Office had an almost immediate impact. As Sanders writes:

> "In the eight years of the Lindsay administration 366 films were made; by the second year of the Beame administration, forty-six features were being made in the city."[7]

This boom in production also resulted in the refurbishing of the old Astoria studio, which reopened in 1975. Film production provided a clean industry to a city that was in the process of losing all types of productive enterprise.

Bonnie and Clyde marked the arrival of the New Hollywood Era, ushering in a director-driven economic model.

Beyond detailing actions that took place within the New York City bureaucracy, it is worth looking more deeply into an overlap between this intense and successful concentration of films set in New York City and the short-lived but highly distinctive "New Hollywood" period of film production. In terms of film narratives, the fact that New York-based scripts were so vital to the industry signaled the ultimate end of the first phase of the studio system and the rise of a generation of young directors influenced by the French New Wave and the related auteurist school of film criticism.[8] In terms of cinematic predecessors in Hollywood, the relative economic success of some of early director-driven films—such as *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), *Easy Rider (*1969), *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), and the *French Connection* (1971)—enticed studios to fund other "personal" projects by younger directors, sometimes at their own financial peril.[9]

Technological developments in the 1960s that made cameras and processing equipment lighter and more mobile also encouraged location shoots. Indeed, a more mobile visual style distinguished many of these films from those on-location productions that had preceded them.[10] In the 1960s technological changes allowed for smaller tape recorders and cameras. In the early 1970s the introduction of the decidedly more mobile cameras marked a large leap forward. In the later 1970s, the Steadicam effectively could capture movement and express that movement in less scripted ways than had been possible just ten years before. This overall change in equipment encouraged location shoots, so that the city-as-film-set also became a cheaper alternative to shooting on Hollywood backlots while providing a look that fit with the reigning aesthetic.[11] Rather than discrete parts of the city serving as a soundstage, now the city opened up as one large location.[12]

These NY-based films express various contemporary historical dispositions, including Hollywood's industrial history, New York's particular urban history, and broader international economic history.

Specifically, the film narratives focus on the entertainment industry and more broadly the domain of mass communications and New York City's relative place in it. These films divide into those that make extensive use of location shoots—*Saturday Night Fever* (1977) and *Fame* (1980)—and those that are almost completely soundstage-bound —*New York, New York* and *All that Jazz*; though these two emphatically declare their New York reference. *Network* (1976) falls somewhere in the middle, with a number of studio shots complemented by a number of discernible New York City locations. And the two films that employ the fewest actual shots of the city are also the most personal projects of this list.

Beyond their obvious focus on the media/entertainment industry, all of the films rewrite conventional film narratives about show business by emphasizing a broader scale of success. Now success must extend beyond the immediate and local: to simply perform before live audiences is not sufficient. All the scripts project outward to a media market defined by reduced definitions of art and expanded visions of commerce. These are films of the moment. It was a time when New York's place in a broad international system of trade was being enhanced as a result of its extensive and burgeoning means of communication. Those media and their infrastructure were central in transforming a moment of urban decline into a period of selective prosperity and status as a "global city." The films also explore distinctions among the relative spaces of the metropolis, emphasizing the distance between the regions of the successful and the spaces of those that merely aspire to success. With this kind of narrative emphasis, we are allowed a glimpse of the gentrifying city, the city of world commerce in the process of being formed.[13]

As the films assert a necessary increase in the scale of marketing and distribution of media products, such a view can be seen in terms of a longer historical perspective. Seeking to globally increase marketing and distribution had its basis in early twentieth century film distribution, but it was enhanced significantly by the United States' central role in the post-World War II international economy. Indeed, the U.S. film industry reasonably represents the relative place of U.S. commerce in general during this period. As a means of creating markets for U.S.-made products, the U.S. entertainment industry extended its network of investments in international radio and television. Gerald Sussman gives statistics for the period:

> "In the early post-war period the Third World, especially Latin America, was seen by U.S. state and corporate planners as increasingly important consumer markets for the absorption of a revitalized U.S. export economy. By the 1960s, ABC-International was part owner of 54 Latin American and other Third World television stations in 24 countries" (37).

Such penetration was also taking place in both Europe and Asia. By the 1980's, Gary Edgerton tells us, that "between 30 and 55 per cent of Hollywood's advertiser supported revenue came from outside of the U.S.," showing the persistence of foreign investment. "[15]

This tendency towards an increasingly global vision of product
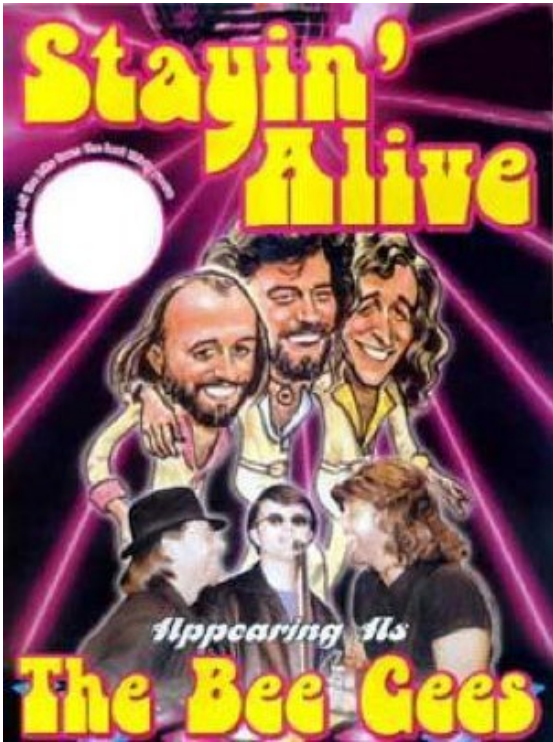
The Bee Gees album "Staying Alive" anticipated *Saturday Night Fever* and was part of the trend towards cross-marketing in different media.

Irene Cara sang the hit theme song from *Fame* to the benefit of the film, while the film also benefitted from the popular music hit.

distribution can also be seen in the shift of the U.S. film industry to the blockbuster approach that began to dominate the by the mid-1970s. By the time the films I am considering were released, Hollywood had largely recovered from the economic slump of the late 1960 and early the 1970s. Its economic recovery then allowed for the rise of the New Hollywood era of film production, in which independent producers and young directors had newly gained power to develop and shape their film projects. But by the mid-decade, the Hollywood paradigm shifted again. In the later decade, studios produced relatively fewer films but sought to maximize profit from each. David Cook indicates:

> "By 1977 the top six of the 199 major films released accounted for one-third of the year's income, and the top thirteen for half."[16]

Key in this approach was Hollywood's eye towards films that could be pre-sold to international markets. Such a strategy also involved the cross marketing of films and popular music, a phenomenon we can see at work in at least three of these films—*Fame* and *New York, New York*, and most successfully in *Saturday Night Fever*. The Bee Gee's were largely responsible for that score. The song used as the theme music, *Stayin' Alive*, was released six weeks before the film, and, by the time of the movie's premiere was already moving to the top of the *Billboard* charts. It is no accident that this film was perfect for the largest age segment of the film audience, 12 to 22.[17] *Saturday Night Fever* was a major hit, while the other two were solid successes, with grosses around $20 million dollars. *Fame* also benefited from its soundtrack, with the title song receiving an academy award for Best Original Song, as it rose to number 4 on the *Billboard* charts. These music scores reveal an industry looking to expand its chances of success by creating conditions that allowed for cross-marketing, another lesson that was learned though *Easy Rider's* successful use of popular music as a means of capturing a specific demographic.[18]

These films tell of the necessity of one's disembodied presence in the center of an international grid of communications. Following this logic, all of these films relatively denigrate live performance. For example, in *New York, New York*, as part of the commentary on the degree of success available to a talented and savvy performer, the director, Martin Scorsese morphs a stage production number into one on the screen, an intriguing meta-commentary on the contemporary terms of market visibility.[19] In *Fame*, standup comedy is depicted as other than a career in itself; rather, it is valued for its possibility of leading to a television career. Since access to success relies on having one's form projected through a limited number of networks of communication, the films dramatize the spatial divisions of class within New York and the degree to which those divisions are involved with access to larger markets. To remain on the periphery of the city and industry may consign a performer to relative poverty and obscurity. Such distinctions allow viewers to understand how divisions within a specific urban space have significant implications for an individual's relative likelihood of transcending that space and becoming re-situated within a larger system of expression and exchange.

New York's centrality in such a paradigm is enhanced. But this
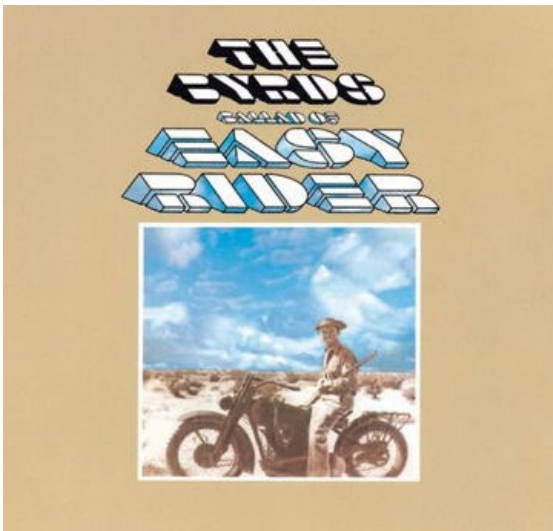
The Byrds album, *The Ballad of Easy Rider*, derived from and enhanced the success of the film.

Ralph Garcy shows the limits of stand-up comedy in *Fame*. We can see the limits of live performance in this film.

RCA introduces television at the 1939 NY World's Fair, signaling a new era in broadcasting and the role of New York City in that world.

enhancement builds on New York City's historical status as a center of entertainment, dating back to its nineteenth century emergence as a center of population and commerce. These nineteenth-century entertainments were defined by their immediacy. Plays, concerts, and lectures were performed by individuals in proximity to a crowd and then publicized both through word of mouth and the emerging popular press. Gradually these New York entertainments were marketed and transported to regions beyond, with the relative New York success of performers serving as an imprint of the show's desirability. These elements were further enhanced by the emergence of a New York-centered advertising industry around the turn of the century, and an industry that burgeoned with the rise of radio after the 1920s. The first commercial radio station was AT & T's WEAF, and the two major radio networks, NBC and CBS, developed in the twenties and early thirties. NBC preceded its rival; it was spawned by RCA as a means of creating a market for its invention. Television was introduced at the New York World's Fair in 1939.

New York also has a significant history as a center of the early film industry, which did not take up residence in California until after 1910. Even when Hollywood became synonymous with commercial film production and distribution after 1920, New York remained an important cog in the industry's business structure throughout. After World War II, as television became a dominant form of entertainment, TV's production and business functions were initially centered in New York. This was largely a matter of executives viewing this new mass medium as an heir to radio, so they often employed the same theaters that had been the points of origin for radio shows. Television was also a medium for live drama, as New York provided access to stage actors and its sound stages and theaters provided venues for performance. But as the network era developed in the mid 1950s and economies of scale became the industry standard, the model for production moved from live performance to film and videotape. As a result, television increasingly took advantage of the production facilities available in California. And though New York remained an important city in show business, by the 1970s that centrality was at least in doubt and perhaps in eclipse. Initially New York stood as a center of production and business organization, then was more involved in business than in production, and finally with the increasing internationalization of entertainment capital was involved primarily because of its role as a global trading center.[20]

These films provide an encyclopedic view of the entertainment industry, as they reference any number of popular forms and suggest the further trajectory of each—in New York and in the world beyond. *Network* depicts the world of television news and entertainment, showing in its satirical form how news becomes entertainment and how freakish spectacle attracts audiences who have ceased to be curious about the world. The object of its satire is the decoupling of corporate responsibility from its news product, resulting in garish and bizarre versions of "the news." *Saturday Night Fever* shows the venue of the New York dance club—of popular music and of the recording industry at both its point of production and reception. But there is

The news becomes more and more outlandish in *Network*. Howard Beale hosts a reality show.

Howard Beale broadcasts to the masses, telling them the news and, later, his views on the news.

Tony Manero flaunts his dancing moves in *Saturday Night Fever*, revealing his local celebrity, but merely local.

great distance between Tony, that film's protagonist, and the polished executives of the recording industry in Manhattan. *Fame* shows us the sub-culture of aspiring young performers in various popular forms—comedy, music, drama—who come of age in New York City. But the leap from aspiration to success is unseen in the course of the movie, raising questions about the links between talent, training, and contemporary success.

But all these films carve out a particular role for New York City, partially through their extensively indexing their West Coast "other": Los Angeles or Hollywood. In the two films that are most about having succeeded, *Network* and *All That Jazz*, the presence of the west coast as a center of the show business industry is a recurring aspect of the narrative. In *New York, New York* and *Fame* the looming seduction of Hollywood influences all represented artistic endeavors. And while broader international success is certainly connected with Hollywood, both films emphasize the cost of such aspiration. This vision of New York as needing a West Coast complement is intriguing. This perception also asserts a New York that reserves its place in entertainment as an incubator for talent, a center for creativity, and a center for business. But these three functions do not typically overlap. As a result New York becomes a cog within a larger system, in effect, two distinct cities—that of performance and entertainment, and that of the entertainment business.

In the two films of mature careers and existing success—*Network* and *All That Jazz*—the business of entertainment occupies the narrative center. Success becomes its own arbiter and a means to wealth and centrality in a particular industry. Such emphases have the effect of rewriting the genre of the show business drama. In this way, putting on a show becomes not the province of Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland, but of men in suits with significant investments in production. Such emphases recast the city at a moment when its population and contours are shifting. There are two markets and levels of commerce and entertainment, one that takes place on the periphery of the business world and is defined by the pleasure of performance and one that is located in mid-town Manhattan and which promises access to the world and its riches.

Such a bifurcation has the effect of shrinking the city-of-success and defining it as largely unavailable to those outside of its upper classes. In effect, we are provided a before and after vision of time—social mobility is a thing of the past and aspiration both perpetual and futile. New York in its central Manhattan contours is defined by its influence in distant space, which is a matter of its means of electronic dissemination and a function of its access to capital. But for those outside of this charmed circle, possibility is restricted to a far more modest set of circumstances. This recurring assertion accounts for a number of elements that are fairly constant in the five films, including the relative valorizing of electronically-disseminated performances. That New York is the site and topic of many films during the 1970s reveals the fact that the city remained a vital entity in both the global and national entertainment sector in the mid- and late-century. But despite that relative boom, these efforts in the realm of cinema were proportionately minuscule in comparison to those productions shot on the West Coast. Further, by the 1980s many location shoots, even of

Students in *Fame* show off their talents in the lunchroom.

Joe Gideon displays the ravages of success in *All That Jazz*, giving all he has for success in the theater and film.

In *All that Jazz* Joe edits his film (*Lenny*) even as he develops his Broadway show. Joe's larger success depends upon the completion of the film.

films ostensibly set in New York, had moved on to lower-priced non-union locations, such as Toronto, Cincinnati, Indianapolis, and other locales. For example, the interior shots of the newsroom in the film *Network* were actually shot outside of Toronto.[21]

The definition of the entertainment business we find in these films emphasizes New York's role in a national and international grid of communications that enables a geometric increase in potential markets. Commensurate with this vision, the city's more general turn-around largely stemmed from its relative advantage in telecommunications technology. Its extensive network capacity allowed for communication with financial centers all over the world.

> "In 1981, New York accounted for almost one-fourth of the nation's overseas business calls and 15 percent of the residential calls, twice as many units as originated in Los Angeles, the second leading origin."[22]

Such capacity, along with the demise of the industrial sector, meant that New York's economy had overwhelmingly become tied to information industries. And those industries, unlike the city's pre-World War II manufacturing economy, provided relatively fewer overall jobs and relatively fewer opportunities for those without significant intellectual capital. While these films do not often tell us much of their characters' social origins—except *Saturday Night Fever* and *Fame*—they do largely paint a picture of success tied to education and social polish. In keeping with the restructuring of New York, and to a degree the national employment market, the films largely articulate a bifurcated system. This depiction of the remoteness of success from failure, even as the two poles exist in relatively proximate physical space, results in a surprising emphasis on education as a means of mobility. *Fame* is explicitly about a secondary school for young performers, dwelling on the means by which they are disciplined both by their exacting teachers and by the strictures of peer culture. Similarly, *Saturday Night Fever* places post-secondary education as crucial in its broad depiction of the drama of class mobility, defining it as a key element of aspiration and hope. But the question of whether a formal credential can either enable success in the entertainment industry or provide a clear path to a viable alternative remains unanswered in these films.

We do see, however, that the educational system remains a powerful lure to those who seek to insulate themselves from the uncertainty of the Post-Fordist moment. Post-Fordism is an epoch that responds to the crisis of over-accumulation that marked the 1960s. Fordism refers to the centralized and regularized mode of factory production instituted by Henry Ford at his River Rouge facility in 1917. It was defined by the further rationalization of the assembly line, a process already well advanced by Frederick Taylor in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. The 1970s and 1980s saw a restructuring of industrial modes of production, making them cheaper and more flexible, bringing to bear far-flung locations and workers of shifting affiliations. Josef Esser and Joachim Hirsch describe the transition in production that took place in the 1970s as emphasizing

> "post-Taylorist forms or organization and production of

Network: The UBS network welcomes black radicals to its New York headquarters in hopes of developing a show based on their exploits.

labor, on the basis of new information and communications technologies. This does not in any way lead to the end of 'mass production' but to a new technological constitution of it."[23]

Thus, industrial production could take place in any number of places and employ any number of organizational forms, from women sewing in small Indonesian factories and sending their product ultimately to be finished in China, to workers in a store front in Los Angeles making micro-processors for computers made in Taiwan. The ramifications of this shift in productive system had all types of effects, impacting class, perceptions of space at all scales, and relative economic mobility.

With the resulting decline of the need for productive enterprise in the outer boroughs, these Post-Fordist films not only define places like Brooklyn and the Bronx as peripheral, they also powerfully delineate sections of Manhattan as central and connoting an emerging way of life. In her study of changing conceptions and uses of space in New York City as it gentrified during the 1970s and 1980s, Sharon Zukin coins the very useful term: "Artistic Mode of Production/AMP." With the specific example of post-industrial SoHo in mind, she writes,

> "Far from being a response to aesthetic problems, the AMP really represents an attempt by large-scale investors in the built environment to ride out and control a particular investment climate."[24]

She describes the restructuring of urban locales that were formerly the sites of productive industry into places of performance, rehearsal halls, and studio space. Subsequently, as a result of the after-glow of their involvement with the valorized world of art, and the sanitizing of these districts by both their artist residents and the city's officials, many of these spaces soon served as expensive housing for those in the financial sector and those who provided skilled services to those in that sector. She goes on to note that the AMP also depresses the value of labor, as aspiring participants in this world agree to under-employment or unemployment as they try to penetrate this arena of cultural chic, and that under-employment becomes a broader low-wage model for other sectors of the economy.

The Gentrified South Street dock area shows the new New York City, a city where tourism *is* commerce.

Zukin explores the role of historic preservation in creating a kind of ambiance in the gentrifying city. This vision of preservation reminds us, as Philip Rosen notes, that such an activity has as its object a sense of the past that provides for apparent continuity. The emphasis on the architecture of the past, the aesthetization of structures dating from the Fordist era, allows for a theme park-like effect in certain areas. The forms of the past are reified into a nostalgic gloss with no regard for the problems created and expressed by the altered function of that built environment. For example, the redesigned South Street Seaport ceased to be a working port at all, but it now has become the site of restaurants, hotels, and stores where goods made elsewhere could be

readily purchased. Similarly, the industrial areas east of SoHo, formerly the home of a vital garment industry, now provided the gloss of industry without the dirt and congestion of actual production. Writes Zukin,

> "When the lofts that were used for light manufacturing are reduced to being considered as a cultural artifact…the urban industrial infrastructure submits to the rules of the 'picturesque'"[25]

Such a vision of land use and commerce necessarily glamorizes the deindustrialized urban landscape. The result is a city that derives some aspects of its cultural prestige from its exclusiveness and its ability to preserve its formerly useful structures as iconic. Thus, these films about entertainment powerfully participate in this emerging geographic and economic rearticulation of space, culture, and class.

Go to page 2

Spaces of aspiration

As moments in films like *Fame* and *Saturday Night Fever* affirm upward mobility, crime and economic despair visibly occur in areas that are navigable from the center of Manhattan but which are distinctly different spaces. This vision well expresses the ways in which global cities are not only emblematic of uneven development on a global scale; they also reference such variations on a regional scale. In this geographical pattern, one may be physically near those who prosper, but still may not have access to the means by which prosperity occurs. These films emphasize that areas related to central Manhattan define the spaces of aspiration. But these areas are distinct. As Saskia Sassen tells us, gentrification from the mid-1970s onward occurred in distinct areas, leaving districts that were contiguous to these zones of wealth in what is, in effect, a different world.

> "The expansion of the number of professionals, especially in the high-income segment working and living in Manhattan, has been a central fact in the gentrification of several parts of the city. It is evident in Manhattan and certain areas of Brooklyn where once poor and middle-income neighborhoods now contain highly priced commercial and residential buildings… There is a ring of poverty that runs through Northern Manhattan, the South Bronx, and much of Northern Brooklyn."[26]
> [open endnotes in new window]

In such a model, one that defines access and not proximity to certain areas as a key element of social mobility, to aspire without access is a strategy destined to result in failure. For the characters in these films who perform, lack of access to the electronic means of dissemination means to have a work-life that is severely constrained in terms of broad audience and remuneration.

In the films of this essay, to succeed is not necessarily a matter of talent but a matter of insinuating oneself into the spaces of success. But none of the films offers a well-articulated route, perhaps showing us the uncertainty of economic life where historical means of mobility are foreclosed. This view of New York has the effect of narrowing its corridors of power to some office buildings in central Manhattan. In this post 1975 world, where access to wealth is far from fluid, a family like the Maneros in *Saturday Night Fever* is largely boxed in by their home, neighborhood, and lack of access to places that might serve as a way out of those restrictions. Tony rarely goes to Manhattan, and apparently neither his friends nor his parents go there at all. This is a world where class is a binding economic and geographic state, where the trains lead into Brooklyn but do not seem to lead out. Tony's father does not bother to exit his confining house because he knows there is little opportunity "out there."

This vision relates well to the spatial reconfiguration of the city articulated

The Brooklyn Bridge looms between Tony and Manhattan in *Saturday Night Fever*, signaling the distance between his world and that of cosmopolitan Manhattan.

Tony eats his pizza, showing his ordinariness in his Brooklyn environs.

Tony walks the streets of Brooklyn, restricted by his environment.

in the late 1970s. As New York sought to recover from a long period of manufacturing decline, its growth came in a fairly restricted network of sectors and in the area of corporate services most dynamically. By 1989, those services provided twice the amount of employment they had in 1950. These included legal services, management consulting, accounting, and other means of serving those in financial services. And while that portion of the economy grew, it did not do so in a notable way. As a result of the increase in the corporate services sector's relative wealth, a real estate boom occurred, both in office buildings and in residential property. These increases in property value took place largely within the core of Manhattan. Poorer residents found themselves squeezed between gentrification and a related phenomenon of building abandonment. For example, in *Fame*, the abject circumstances of two African American and Puerto Rican central characters (Leroy and Ralph, respectively) are affirmed by their living in the deserted streets of the Bronx. In the Bay Ridge of *Saturday Night Fever*, gentrification would make its mark over the next decade, and the question for downwardly mobile families like the Maneros would be whether or not they could stay in their homes. Both situations point to the fact that traditional union jobs that had provided a living wage for newcomers to New York and their children had dried up. Central Manhattan prospered and the outer boroughs and their inhabitants waited for the wealth to trickle down.[27]

Such circumstances redounded to the disadvantage of those who clung precariously to the outer edges of the middle class. *Saturday Night Fever*, the first of the chronology covered in this essay, begins with a view of Lower Manhattan shot across the Brooklyn Bridge. As the music increases in intensity, the shot fades to one of a more distant view. As that island retreats into the distance, our camera-eye view takes a right turn, further obscuring our vision of Manhattan. We then track along the Verrazano Bridge linking Bay Ridge, Brooklyn to Staten Island. The shot then zooms in on the modest scale of Bay Ridge before closely observing the side of a subway car moving along the elevated tracks with a flash of steel, a shriek of a whistle, and a screech of the brakes. As the opening shot suggests, Manhattan is far away and perhaps getting more distant every minute.

We then see a pair of shoes on the sidewalk and a pair in a shop window, as the music shifts into the Bee Gees "Staying Alive," a song made famous by the film and which made the film more famous. The shoes become a kind of fetish object, representing a local vision of style—that of Bay Ridge and Bensonhurst, Brooklyn—and yet another marker of class. Tony is charismatic but lacks any kind of polish or sophistication. We then see a close-up of Tony's face as he struts and eats pizza, with some sauce finding its way to the corners of his mouth. The camera angles focus on the claustrophobic nature of both the neighborhood and its interior spaces, revealing the locale as a series of rectangles that are defined by their restricted borders. For example, the paint store where Tony works is initially shot in deep focus, making it long and thin, emphasizing how little room there is to move within it. The Maneros' house is more box-like but no less confining.

This is a self-contained world, working class and destined to stay that way. Or in the case of Tony's family, they are non-working, as his father is out of his construction job and his brother has stopped being a priest. Only Tony works, and in a job that suggests little mobility and that we know, when Home Depot or some other big-box store opens in near-by Staten Island,

Tony is the king of the disco, its center of attention.

Tony and Stephanie rehearse, expressing their natural chemistry.

In *New York, New York* Liza Minelli and Robert DeNiro meet on VJ-Day, beginning their troubled romance in the center of the world.

may well cease to exist. As we see the social focus of the local young people's lives, the disco, we also see that they are the center of that world, as a camera focused on Tony films him mid-frame and almost full-bodied as he walks through an adoring crowd. This is his world of fame and fortune, but it is decidedly self-contained.

What is also notable about this film, a fact anticipated by its opening shots, is the way in which Manhattan looms unattainable in the distance. Stephanie, Tony's dance partner, is employed by a record company in a clerical role and is sexually involved with her boss. She serves as a mediating presence between these two distinct worlds. She is of Bay Ridge but lives and works in Manhattan. When she and Tony dance, their connection is unmistakable. Yet, when they are not dancing, she holds herself remote. Tony is not part of her plan for social mobility.

It is not the club that defines the space of aspiration, however. Tony is already a God there. But to be a king in Bay Ridge is a very limited type of fame in the context of this film. The shots of the streets of Bay Ridge and Bensonhurst accentuate the restrictions of the elevated subway lines and the elevated highways, both of which cast shadows on the streets. It is the dance studio that is his specific place of longing. In that mirror, Tony, with Stephanie as his object, can see himself as worthy of adulation. This scene in the mirror is implicitly opposed to the scene in which he frames himself in his bedroom mirror with a picture of Al Pacino juxtaposed against his own face. In this earlier scene, he pretends to be the actor, chanting "Attica," as Pacino did in *Dog Day Afternoon*, as he struts in his black briefs. And while the scene at home defines his desire for a certain type of persona, it is in the realm of the purely imaginative. This is in opposition to the shots of the studio, which emphasize its spaciousness and utility, its distinctness as a place apart. In his practice with this particular partner, Stephanie, it is the dance itself that is qualitatively distinctive, and the studio is a bracketed space that enables this performance. Stephanie is both his very able partner and a symbol of a possible life distinct from the one he lives.

New York, New York offers a somewhat different view of mobility but a related view of the world. It is still focused on aspirations of success in the entertainment industry and that success is oriented around the centrality of New York. Since this is a film shot on soundstages, and in some interior spaces in Los Angeles, it immediately becomes a highly stylized meta-commentary about other films, asking questions about the representation of mobility that frequent film musicals.[28] Its New York employs a vision that eschews notions of the meaning of the built environment in order to comment on the relative plausibility of narratives of romance and success in the big city. Such a tale, then, projects its own vision of relational space onto the plotted emotional relationships. And in New York the disparities between our protagonists become the most visible, as their quests for show business success in New York confirms its nature and cost and therefore the terms of each character's relative talents and aspirations.

The film begins on V-E Day at the end of World War II, presumably a moment which projects a future era of great possibility. We meet our main

New York, New York: Jimmy auditions in Brooklyn, but is too hip for even that outer borough.

Jimmy and Francine discuss her impending departure as she gets ready to hit the road with a band.

Jimmy jams, playing the music he loves but failing to prosper by doing so.

characters in the center of a massive celebration in the "center of the world"—Times Square. This film takes as its point of departure the postwar world and all the social and economic changes that would occur in the late 1940s and early 1950s. These include the rise of youth culture and the mass phenomenon of rock and roll. But it also includes the residual prominence of singers from the Big Band era who further homogenized their sound, such as Rosemary Clooney and Doris Day. This cultural shift forms a backdrop for the film. As the film opens, we find a massive ballroom with hundreds of dancers while musicians who represent Tommy Dorsey and his band play. Both Jimmy Doyle (Robert DeNiro) and Francine (Liza Minnelli) are musicians, one a saxophone player and one a singer. As the movie develops, its love story becomes a tale about artistic standards and worldly success.

Their first gig is in a club in Flatbush, Brooklyn, but far from Tony's Bay Ridge. The club, a stylized locale, is a low-ceilinged, red-walled, claustrophobic space. But even in this outlying district, Francine's influence is necessary in order for Jimmy to be hired and for him to please a mainstream audience. When she leaves New York to tour with the Frankie Hart Big Band, we find Jimmy in the Brooklyn club, jamming with other musicians but with no one dancing or milling around. As we hear of Francine's departure, Jimmy and her agent, played by Lionel Stander, walk out on to the patently "unreal" street. The scene ends with Jimmy playing the saxophone beneath a halo of light, with a lamppost centered in the high-angle shot. This vision of Jimmy plaintively blowing his horn provides a wistful end to part one of the film, and one that shows Jimmy's limited range of impact, as this halo suggests only relative star power—a spotlighted player who plays for himself and seeks no particular audience except that of the cognoscenti.

Like Tony in *Saturday Night Fever*, Jimmy is lost in Brooklyn. Unlike Tony, he endeavors to get out not because of ambition but for love. We next find him on a dirt road somewhere, two large suitcases in hand. He walks down the road, encumbered, lost, and with no particular destination but Francine. We are clearly supposed to see the band as in a kind of exile, more remote from centers of communication than Brooklyn, as Francine and Frankie pursue a type of commerce that touches upon art but is not art, which produces money but not so much of it.

When Francine becomes pregnant, she leaves the band. As we see Jimmy and the new singer failing on the road—the billboard informs us of their cancelled shows—we see Francine in a studio in New York recording in the styles of various better–known pop singers, as her manager and a recording executive plot her success. Jimmy returns home but does not enter the world where Francine is in the process of succeeding. When he returns to their apartment, the couple is generally shot in mid-range with the other person sitting across the room. Professionally, he almost immediately sits in with a group of African American musicians who play hard bop, a type of music in which there is no place for Francine, a music of men with a small and dedicated audience. Jimmy's New York is a hipster's place and not a place of commerce. That these two New York spaces—the place of jazz and the place of pop—can co-exist so close to one another shows us the various niches of the industry in which Jimmy and Francine work and in which they occupy radically different places. Thus, Jimmy's Harlem leads nowhere in particular, while Francine's midtown recording leads to Broadway and Hollywood. She insinuates herself into that space with alacrity. For her, to be in the center of New York is to succeed, and to succeed in this way leads to a wider scale of fame and

New York, New York: Francine's career ascends as she enters the recording studio and the world of mass communications.

Fame: Coco and Bruno wisely discuss their futures while walking in Times Square, mapping out their recording careers.

Fame: Times Square serves as a dance stage for the students.

adulation.

Fame operates with a related view of success, but with a more nuanced view of the value of the various spaces of New York. It is actually set in the relative center of Manhattan, in the dilapidated structure of the School for the Creative Performing Arts at 120 West 46th Street.[29] Times Square at this point is an unsavory district that clearly lacks the glamour it had in the past. But by 1980 it is in the process of being transformed. This transformation is material in the fact that when the film was shot, this high school was in the process of being moved uptown. In 1976, the year after default, the 42nd Street Redevelopment Association was formed, with the intention of redeveloping the western end of that street. And while this project never came to fruition, it did spark discussion of the contours of the new Times Square.

By 1981, a year after the release of this film, the redevelopment began to take shape. The ultimate result of this process was a redefinition of the region that all but eliminated the blight that had marked Times Square in the 1960s and 1970s.[30] But it also altered the character of the district and its status as a haven for liminal social actors. Gone were the idlers, the homeless, the sex-workers, and others seeking sexual partners. Scenes such as those that were so prominent in *Midnight Cowboy* and *Taxi Driver* became less common in films and then vanished. *Fame* is part of that pre-1981 epoch, showing how in the old New York, the public marketplace allowed for all kinds of figures and how art need not be coupled with commerce in order to achieve relevance. While Times Square previously constituted the image of the city in decline, subsequently this sanitized district has been compared to the sterility of Disneyland and noted for the preemptive policing of its private force.[31]

In a key scene we see two of our featured students, Bruno and Coco, walking in Times Square at night to discuss their future project as principals in a popular rock band. We locate Times Square initially with the benign and visually compelling red of a huge neon Coca Cola sign. The music shifts to upbeat popular funk; the montage goes from close ups of hot dogs on the rotating grill at the Orange Julius restaurant to shots that capture the square from the south and show movie marquis' that feature not porn titles, but those of first-run Hollywood films, including Disney's *Sleeping Beauty*. As they walk and talk, and we watch from a slightly distanced and skewed frame, Coco tells of her aspirations: "I'm just killing time here waiting for my opportunity. It might be a movie or a Broadway musical. But it's coming. I keep my eyes open." This district is one that serves as part of the urban color that marks this distinctive school. This Times Square is far from sanitary or beautiful; but it is not menacing.

Fame chronicles a place predicated on the idea of education leading to social mobility and does so in a space that once symbolized New York. In Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* and in *Midnight Cowboy*, the place retroactively symbolized urban despair. But soon it will symbolize the status of New York as a post-modern global city, where the iconic status of Times Square will have little to do with its 1970s incarnation. Commercially it is a location marker emptied of its history. And in *Fame*, despite the crowded school and the relatively central location, this is very much a movie about art and isolation. The school stands as a mediating space between the various places these students come from and a projected place in the world where their talents will distinguish them.

One of the characters, named Leroy, is an African American dancer who

Fame: Leroy's English teacher confronts him, and we later find that Leroy is functionally illiterate.

Leroy shows the despair of his living conditions, indicating the enormous class differences among the students.

Fame: Bruno's taxi-driving father attempts to direct his son towards more commercially viable music.

has difficulty reading. He is the key figure of the underclass in this film, so he becomes the extreme case of whether this educational institution can produce success. A jump cut takes us from the school to Leroy's neighborhood and presumably his home beneath the elevated train tracks, in the smoldering garbage. This is outside space defined by apparently homeless people and utter squalor, a New York vision of hell, but one that seems self-contained. This space is different from that of relative possibility. Here Leroy finds a discarded newspaper and haltingly attempts to read it.

Such an abrupt shift of tone and relative safety of place elevates the school as a zone of aspiration, but in doing so reminds us of the degree to which Leroy-like characters rely on it and are served by it in very limited ways. Again, we are provided a bifurcated class system, a system to which the student Bruno may define an exception, though the life of a New York City taxi driver seems barely middle-class and something of an index of downward mobility. In fact, as we see the demographic movements occurring within the city, it is likely that characters like Bruno will move farther and farther from Manhattan as the years pass. Perhaps this explains his father's desire to move him from his interest in solo electronic music composition to playing in a pop band.

Despite the aspirations of its teen-aged stars, *Fame* also frames its vision of education, at least among those who are middle-class and above, in relation to a lingering and insistent fear of downward family mobility. Such a view of life's prospects and vision of education captures the economic insecurity of the period. This is true in many cases, but particularly in what we see of the students Doris and Montgomery. Doris is from Brooklyn and the object of an overly-engaged mother's concerns. Her mother attends the girl's audition and is marked by both her investment and her anxiety. In their dark and claustrophobic Brooklyn apartment, when the school calls to inform Doris that she has been accepted, her mother, Naomi, exclaims, "We're in." But throughout the film, Doris is the recipient of her mother's expressions of fears regarding her future.

Montgomery has a central address in Times Square, but it is difficult to see he lives more genteel life. He lives alone since his mother is a touring actress, and he has no furniture. While he has no parent to express anxiety over his future, he lives the prospect of downward mobility since his actress mother fails to provide him with anything but the bare essentials. As an adolescent on his own, Montgomery seems unlikely to achieve success outside of show business, and his prospects within that arena are extremely limited.

Similarly the wealthiest of the students, Lisa, becomes pregnant by Leroy and must face the implications of her possible motherhood. As she addresses the nurse at the abortion clinic, her entire monologue is devoted to the career she expects to have. Then only in her last sentence does she announce that a baby has no place in her plans. She is shot inside an

Fame: Montgomery develops his acting abilities in hopes of a career after high school.

All That Jazz: Joe Gideon assesses his aspiring dancers, expressing his power and his astute judgment.

All That Jazz: Joe is abraded for his slowness in producing his large-budget film, a film akin to the Bob Fosse-directed Lenny.

upscale clinic that inhabits a former East Side mansion. The space looks much like that of her home. The camera begins with a wide shot but gradually zooms to a shot of her filling the frame, suggesting her extreme self-absorption. These various but related visions of the students' homes define the environment of the high school as exceedingly competitive and fraught with the anxiety of making it since home life offers few alternatives.

The other two films*, All that Jazz* and *Network,* are far less interested in spaces of hope and aspiration. Though the other three films are almost solely photographed indoors—recognizing the use of indoor venues for the outdoor scenes in *New York, New York*—these productions reduce exterior shots even further. The interior space they emphasize is workspace. Thus, *All That Jazz* is similar to *Saturday Night Fever* in its dwelling on the workspace of the theater and dance studio, but most of the film is shot among those who have already been cast in a musical. Tony has not even attended an open audition, an occasion we see in the opening scene of the *All That Jazz*. The film opens with the song "On Broadway" accompanying a montage of a mass call for dancers for a Broadway show directed and choreographed by the Bob Fosse-character named Joe Gideon. Though it is reminiscent of a scene we might see in the *Saturday Night Fever* sequel, it is distinctive in that it is shot from the point of view of the talent appraiser rather than the appraised. As a result, the stage is expansive, the scenes are cut down to pieces of dance, and the individuals are virtually faceless. We see a succession of them but only the dancer with whom Joe will eventually have sex, with, Victoria, is given much distinct screen time.

In addition, a group that includes the show's producer, Joe's daughter, his ex-wife, and two other producers sit in the back of the auditorium commenting on the performances. All have some intimate relationship with Joe. He consults with them though ultimately chooses a cast based on his own disposition, a fact that confirms his power and confidence. This is a largely biographical tale, a biography in which all elements orient around work. Joe spent a boyhood in burlesque. A dancer in his mid-years, he is now casting a show. He is also editing a film he has directed, a parallel to the Fosse film *Lenny,* for which that director won an academy award. This whirl of activity as well as the apparently inevitable movement from stage to film and back again reveals a world in which virtually all space is that of entertainment work—a kind of hurry-up process in show business in which those that have stature occupy all positions possible, so that no aspirants can break through. The space of aspiration here is the theater stage of the audition, but unlike in *Saturday Night Fever*, there is no other space but workspace for those who seek success in entertainment. We see no local activities; we have no sense of lives outside of work. Joe's drive is so great that it literally kills him.

Network paints a similar picture of worklife, but in this satire the film actually represents the driving force that manages the lives of all who aspire and all who succeed. This is a corporate drama about the decline of ethics and the increasing dominance of a business model that cares nothing for product, only profit. Howard Beale and Max Schumacher

Network: Howard Beale and Max Shumacher drink and discuss the glory days of network news. As we come to see, those days are long past.

represent throwbacks to an earlier era of integrity. This film, like *All That Jazz,* has no spaces of aspiration. In a well-articulated hierarchy, the managers seemingly have local authority, but corporate power reigns. Thus, those who emerge from outside of the corporate hierarchy to succeed do so in limited ways and only for as long as their corporate bosses let them. We see few exterior spaces in a film largely set in mid-town Manhattan at the corporate headquarters of USB productions, an entity that controls who goes in and who goes out, both physically and electronically.

Go to page 3

To top   Print version   JC 54   *Jump Cut* home

Performing the post-industrial city

Frank Hackett is in charge of the news operation. The space of his office in *Network* indicates the power of the corporate conglomerate.

In *Saturday Night Fever* Tony makes a rare visit to Stephanie's Manhattan apartment and is told that their relationship, however limited, has no future.

All these five films overwhelmingly dwell on interior space, a focus that defines their strategy as centripetal. While to some degree their various narratives set the action in interior space, their visual emphasis in this regard connotes a larger story about work and the city. The films stay indoors even when their narratives seem to push them out. And in all cases, interior space is the realm of the private, the bureaucratic, and the corporate. Since performance space in media and the arts is subjugated to marketplace demands, the larger the potential profit of a given "presentation," the more constrained the access to the profit-making presentational space. In such a model, we see the realms of "art" and "integrity," terms fetishized and suffused with nostalgia in these films, subsumed by a business model that leaves little room for any equation but that which ends in a dollar amount. Within the films, explicitly qualitative judgments of talent, vision, and creativity are minimized; even the plots are involved in a hierarchical system that exercises authority based on perspectives that reduce all performance to product. Arguably, those characters with talent are subordinated to those with administrative power gained from their narrow means/ends worldview. Thus, the films valorize fame, bureaucracy, and institutional notions of education.

This question of who defines success and the definition's connection to a business model of performance gives an insight into these cinematic representations of a world of circumscribed space. Such spaces show us a city of restricted dimensions replete with an enforced hierarchy. For example, in *Network* corporate flunky Frank Hackett, played by Robert Duvall, commands Schumacher: "You're fired. I want you out of your office before noon or I'll have you thrown out." The visual depiction of Hackett's office shows him as central, a man in authority who remains centered in that space, commands the tightest close up, and has the use of the phone, the instrument for calling security. Urban space in these films has become not the agora but rather corporate controlled interiors. The dynamism of the street has been replaced with the fluctuations of a relatively circumscribed marketplace, a place that grants access according to one's ability to access its electronic nodes of entry. Thus while the networks of communication gesture out to the world, the specific space where these networks produce their products is shown as privatized and constrained, marking a new vision of the centripetal as space constrained by the forces of private enterprise. Saskia Sassen describes precisely this phenomenon as characterizing global cities' role in a world system:

> "Massive trends towards the spatial dispersal of economic activities at the metropolitan, national and global level are indeed all taking place, but they represent only half of what is happening. Alongside the well-documented spatial dispersal of economic activities, new forms of territorial centralization of top-level management and control operations have appeared. National and global markets as well as globally integrated

operations require central places where the work of globalization gets done. Further, information industries require a vast physical infrastructure containing strategic nodes with hyperconcentrations of facilities."[32] [open endnotes in new window]

Such recurring representations of the entertainment industry are also indicative of the New Hollywood era in film production, as well as its analogues in the music and television industries. Further, they help connect both the content of these films and their mode of production to the emergent Post-Fordist moment of economic history. In the U.S. film industry, this is a period of both innovation and ultimately consolidation. The mid 1970s stand as the cusp of the adventurous late 1960s and early 1970s, and the blockbuster era of the mid 1970s. The films implicitly seem to recognize the transition taking place, as they dwell in recurring definitions of interior corporate space. And they typically place that kind of space within a hierarchy defined by a vision of a far-flung audience/market that can be accessed only through limited points of entry. The power of bureaucrats is to restrict this access. This vision of bureaucracy speaks to the structure of the Post-Fordist workplace. As organizations increase in complexity and authority increasingly migrates away from those involved in materially productive enterprises, tiers of upper management assume increasing importance.

In *Network* the act of removing Howard or Schumacher, those more directly concerned with the presentation of the news, from the building is an assertion of naked power. Similarly, in *Saturday Night Fever*, Stephanie never allows Tony into her workplace in the record industry though he clearly aspires to a life outside of Bay Ridge. She also limits his access to her apartment in Manhattan, which was formerly the place of her employer and lover. These constraints show us that even her very limited relation to the devices of the entertainment industry allow her to exercise relative power over the provincial Tony.

The relations articulated between the value of a particular space and its role in a electronic means of dissemination place these businesses in their Post-Fordist era, and thus provide the films with a kind of cultural resonance that connects them to other forms of industrial production. This shift refers both to the transitions that were occurring in U.S. productive industries at large and to Hollywood, where the former industrial model of the studio system was now defunct. Film companies sold their backlots and became components of larger multi-national corporations.[33] The

Max opens his window and witnesses what

Howard has wrought, a populist uprising with no political impact.

The parent company director tells Howard that his is the face of God in *Network*, as he attempts to get Howard to comply with the wishes of the company.

In *Network*, the UBS corporate chiefs plot Howard's assassination, the only way to get rid of their star without angering his audience.

prevalence of independent producers that drove the New Hollywood era in the early 1970s may be seen as part of the industry's move into the Post-Fordist moment.[34] More broadly, this era was ushered in by an increasing ease in the movement of capital and goods, enabled by enhanced means of communications between financial centers and far-flung locales of decentralized production. And while all of these films represent and valorize electronic networks of dissemination, it is *Network* that does so most emphatically.

Network is replete with references to and representations of this new system. As the film begins, we see the newscaster Howard Beale as one of four faces in a framing of four monitors showing the network newscasters of the mid 1970s: Walter Cronkite, John Chancellor, and Howard K. Smith. The voice over by Max Schumacher (played by William Holden), the head of the UBS network's news division, tells us that Howard had been a legend and now is suffering from low ratings and personal problems. Max and Howard go out for drinks after the broadcast, so that Max can give his friend the news that he is fired. They wax nostalgically about "the good old days" of network news and end at a bar, with Max cynically spinning programming ideas that will play to the lowest common denominator as Howard lies on the bar drunk. But with the rise of cable television, the authority of these talking heads was about to erode, and the Howard Beales of the world could indeed be more valuable as mad prophets of doom than as the authoritative voice of truth.

The credits roll and we are shown in succession, the corporate headquarters of the big four networks. These buildings are shot from close range and low angles, emphasizing the size and gravity of their imposing skyscrapers. They seem like medieval castles, cities unto themselves. As we go inside the UBS building, we find much the same, a world that creates the world, an entity that is self-constrained and that functions unto its own logic. As Howard announces that he will be leaving the nightly newscast in two weeks, he adds that he will also be killing himself on the air. We witness this performance from the control room, as Howard is shown on many monitors but we "sit" behind the production board, watching the technicians, who are involved in their own bored banter and who are not watching Howard. It is only through the intervention of a woman transcribing the newscast that his words get noticed.

That "news" has clearly become a commodity and like any commodity answerable only to the desires of the marketplace redounds throughout the early part of this film. But news' status as an electronic commodity with its origins and means of dissemination in a relatively restricted district of central Manhattan is also an important visual element of these early scenes. After Howard's assertion, the network goes into damage-control mode, a situation that makes its condition even more insular. We hear of hordes of reporters in the lobby though we do not see them. What we do see is Howard's newscast becoming news in itself, apparently supporting his on-air assertion that his suicide will garner a huge audience.

Network offers a prescient vision of the new era of communication and network spatial organization that was just becoming visible in the mid 1970s. This era is defined by networks of electronic communication that connect certain sectors of specific urban locales to corresponding sectors of other urban spaces, regardless of the actual distance configured. It is the means of communication that developed in the mid 1970s and resulted in a New York that was more focally connected to London than it was to Bridgeport, Connecticut. This reconfiguration of urban space and its role in

a shifting world order, what Manuel Castells defined as the "space of flows," "the informational city," a conception of certain urban spaces transcending the materiality of physical place as they are more precisely defined by their situation in electronic systems of communication.[35] *Network* tells of a New York that has become the sum of its particular means of electronic communication.

And following this logic as it occurs in *Saturday Night Fever*, *New York, New York*, *All that Jazz*, and *Fame*, access to the means of dissemination defines material success. Thus, we can see how art for the marketplace serves as both a symptom and a symbol of the Post-Fordist moment. This product like all others can be produced by a vast flexible and largely captive work force engaged for a particular task and then let go. As in textiles, there is a local boss, but command functions may be ensconced in far away locales, enabled by the technology of modern communication. Art becomes, like news, a commodity and its aura, much like the aura of a certain branded garment, becomes a means of positioning it in the global marketplace. Art as a thing has the power to participate in the utter transformation of both the physical urban landscape and its social character, since the city as a cultural center may organize its central spaces to enable performance and to attract both performers and denizens of the various media displayed.

In *New York, New York* Jimmy's successful jazz club features the music he values, showing the possibility of blending the commercial and the artistic.

A film like *New York, New York*, for example, despite its obvious and intentional artifice, offers a vision of New York that, while set in the 1950s and clearly nostalgic, locates its residual status as a locale where the avant-garde could exist alongside the commercial, however marginal the role of the avant-garde becomes. Indeed, such a vision is part of the aura of the contemporary city as a center of culture. And in this film, more than the others, as art morphs into artifice, the stylized soundstages that form this vision of the city are picturesque in a manner that both accentuates Zukin's vision of the aestheticized city, as well as draws attention to the inherent partiality and constructed-ness of such visions. In its positioning the arts as central to the city's economic life, the film enhances New York's post-industrial image and speaks to its shifting demographic.

Jimmy plaintively plays beneath a street lamp in faux Brooklyn, wondering about his fate.

Jimmy's devotion to his music, choosing it over love and money, naturalizes those on the margins of the entertainment industry and provides an antithesis by which we can further valorize market-based success. And indeed, Jimmy's devotion to art over commerce leaves him on the outside of both his marriage and the success that could be his. He is consigned to the fringes of the city, partially because there is no marketplace where his music might be heard and judged without bias. It is intriguing that two major transitional scenes find him alone under spotlight formed by street lamps. These street scenes lack the dynamism of the city streets and suggest there is no outside to the inside defined as the privately controlled space of commerce.

But what is the broader social effect of cities that include any number of citizens who are perpetually in a state of economic insecurity? When Howard exhorts his viewers to open their windows and scream, "I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take it anymore," the screamers are thrown into a world that has all but ceased to exist—that outside of their windows. Yet, the electronic prompt and the lack of interaction among the screamers suggest that this is a late twentieth century version of a polity. That is, the viewers engage in no discussion or debate, nor do those in a given political movement engage one another. All cues are from a remote location and all feeling is visceral. Howard is nearby, but we find that he has a similar impact hundreds and thousands of miles away. This vision of mass communication well anticipates Castells' vision. But such a vision ignores that is always a *there*. The building exists; the studio exists; and the means of communication, the electronic devices that allow dissemination, all have a specific materiality and location that can only be ignored if we mistake the immateriality of the image for the materiality of its means of production and dissemination. Though the images pervade the air, they are enabled by the UBS corporation and designed to increase the wealth of that business and its corporate owners. As Sassen reminds us,

> "The vast new economic topography that is being implemented through electronic space is one moment, one fragment, of an even vaster economic chain that is in good part embedded in non-electronic spaces. There is no fully dematerialized firm or industry. Even the most advanced information industries, such as finance, are installed only partly in electronic space."[36]

The image of Howard, enabled by Max and then by the other corporate chiefs of the UBS network, is a projection allowed by access and with a specific valence in the commercial world. This is not a placeless world but a world where specific spaces are far more significant than others. And while this has been true to some degree for most of the twentieth century, the relative significance of those spaces has increased geometrically in importance. Indeed, Howard's sin does not come from his incompetence. His sin comes from his waning appeal, and when he finds a means to attract an audience, the absurdity of his means has no bearing.

Ultimately, Howard's madness makes him uncontrollable. It is a world in which business is everything and in which, as the corporate head Arthur Jensen, played by Ned Beatty, tells Howard there is only one law, the law of business. Thus, the profits of the show are meager compared to the larger profits of the international sale of commodities: Howard must go. Arthur

Jensen says, with a god-like forbidding:

> "You have disrupted the forces of nature. There are no nations, only IBM, ITT, only dollars."

And though this is indeed part of the film's over-the-top satire, such a vision of corporate dominance powered by a vision of cost effectiveness would become even more pressing in the succeeding decades. The centrality and hegemony of corporate space establish the means by which all other expressions of power may become irrelevant.

Embedded within these films that dwell in the world of art, entertainment and, more broadly, mass communications is a historical commentary that shows us that the over-supply of labor and the brutal process of selection that prevails in the mass entertainment industry is applicable to the

In *Fame* aspiring actor Michael awaits his big break as he waits on tables in the meantime.

broader structures of the Post-Fordist labor market. These films dwell in the city of performance and romanticize that space, but their narratives narrow the areas from which that performance can be disseminated; there are various registers of effectiveness for a given performance. As we project the futures of our characters, it is far more likely that they will be, like the once-promising Michael in *Fame*, waiting on tables and providing a labor market with an over-supply of desperate workers than it is that they will be on television and movie screens around the world. In such a world, then, all who strive and barely progress may indeed stick their heads out the window and impotently shriek, "I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take it anymore." But to what political effect?

Go to Notes page

To top   Print version   JC 54   *Jump Cut* home

Notes

1. See *Starring New York: Filming the Grime and Glamour of the Long 1970s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). [[return to page 1](#)]

2. See Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space,* trans. David Nicholson-Smith. New York and London: Blackwell, 1991; Neil Smith, *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996); and David Harvey, *Consciousness and the Urban Experience* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989) for elucidating discussion regarding space as a relative conceptual marker, contingent on history and culture.

3. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 41-42.

4. See Philip Rosen, *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 49-58.

5. This headline appeared in the New York *Daily News* October 30, 1975.

6. See the website of the Mayor's Office for Film, Theater and Broadcasting for a full history:
http://www.nyc.gov/html/film/html/office/history_moftb.shtml.
See also Vincent J. Cannato, *The Ungovernable City: John Lindsay and His Struggle to Save New York* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 561-562.

7. James Sanders, *Celluloid Skyline: New York and the Movies* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001), 342-4.

8. The figure who argued most persistently and influentially for auteurist approaches to film was Andrew Sarris in his *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions, 1929-1968 (*New York: E.P. Dutton, 1968*)* and his later *Politics and Cinema* (Columbia University Press, 1978).

9. Coppola's difficulties with his producers, including Robert Evans have taken on the stuff of legend. See, for example, Michael Sragow, "Godfatherhood," in *Francis Ford Coppola Interviews*, eds. Gene D. Phillips and Rodney Hill (Oxford: University Press of Mississippi), 167-183.

10. While it is true that films like *The Lost Weekend* (1945) *The Naked City* (1948), *On the Waterfront* (1954), and *West Side Story* (1961), among others, had employed the streets and buildings of New York City and its environs, they had done so in ways that were quite different from these later films.

These earlier New York films offer fairly limited perspectives on the city, due to the difficulty and expense of moving cumbersome equipment from set up to set up.

11. See David Cook,*Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam, 1970-1979*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 355-380; and James Sanders, 341-42.

12. For related discussion that further illuminates my point see Vanessa Schwartz, *It's So French*: *Hollywood, Paris, and the Making of Cosmopolitan Film Culture* (Chicago: U. of Chicago, 2008) particularly chapters 1 and 4.

13. Arguably, this international role for New York City as a cultural capital has its roots in the 1950s, as the city became prominent as a result of the centrality of the U.S. economy in the world system and in contrast to the European capitals that had suffered significant damage as a result of World War II. See the memoir by Dan Wakefield, *New York in the 50's*, New York: Macmillan, 1999 and Martin Halliwell's *American Culture in The 1950s,* Edinbugh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007.

14. See Gerald Sussman, "Urban Congregations of Capital and Communications: Redesigning Social and Spatial Boundaries, " *Social Text* 17.3 (1999) 35-51.

15. Clyde Edgerton, *The Columbia History of American Television* (New York: Columbia University Press,2007), 372.

16. David Cook, 25.

17. My figures come from the IMDB listing of financial data: *Network*: 23,689,877 (USA); *All That Jazz*: 20,030,000 (USA); *Saturday Night Fever*: 74,100,000 (USA); *Fame*: 21,202,829 (USA) (1980): *New York, New York*: $13,800,000 (USA)

18. The album soundtrack of *Easy Rider* eventually hit number 6, and some of its titles had a second life on the top 40.

19. Cook 25-65; Thomas Schatz, "The New Hollywood," eds. Jim Collins, Ava Collins, and Hillary Radner. *Film Theory Goes to the Movies (*New York: Routledge, 1993), 184-206.

20. See Edgerton, 85-110 and Michael Haupert, *The Entertainment Industry* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2006).

21. Of course, this to some degree explains the propensity of interior shots in films such as *Network*. However, in other films ostensibly set in New York, the fact that the streets were not of that city, such as *Moonstruck*, seemed to serve as little impediment to outdoor scenes.

22. John H. Mollenkopf,*A Phoenix in the Ashes (*Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 52.

23. Esser, Josef and Joachim Hirsch. "The Crisis of Fordism and the

Dimensions of a 'Post-Fordist' Regional and Urban Structure," ed. Ash Amin. *Post-Fordism: A Reader*, New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 1995), 77.

24. Sharon Zukin, *Loft Living: Culture and Capital in Urban Change* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 176.

25. Zukin, 180.

26. Sassen, *The Global City*: *New York, London, Tokyo*, 2nd Edition (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 266-7.
[return to page 2]

27. Moody, *From Welfare State to Real Estate* (New York: New Press, 2008), 24-61; Mollenkopf, 50-68. See also a contemporary account of this process, Samuel G. Freedman, "Signs of Transformation in Neighborly Greenpoint," *New York Times*, October 15, 1986.

28. This film was originally conceived as a location shoot and only morphed in to its ultimate form after many drafts of its screenplay. Scorsese Papers, AFI.

29. The school was subsequently moved up town to Lincoln Center and the structure in this film burned down in 1988. On the site is now the Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis School of International Careers.

30. Traub, *The Devil's Playground (*New York: Random House, 2004) 131-150.

31. See Traub, 160-174. 229-30.

32. Sassen, "Whose City is it?" Globalization and the Formation of New Claims." Lecture at Columbia University, July, 1997. http://www.uni-stuttgart.de/soz/avps/lopofo/ak-publikationen.sassen.pdf , 2. [return to page 3]

33. Tino Balio, "A Major Presence in All the World's Important Markets," ed. Graeme Turner. *The Film Cultures Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2001), 206-217.

34. Thomas Schatz, "The New Hollywood," in *The Film Cultures Reader*, 189-190, 184-205.

35. Manuel Castells, *The Rise of Network Societies* (New York: Blackwell, 2000), 424-448.

36. Qtd. In Mike Featherstone and Scott Lash, *Spaces of Culture*: *City, Nation, World* (London: Sage, 1999), 59.
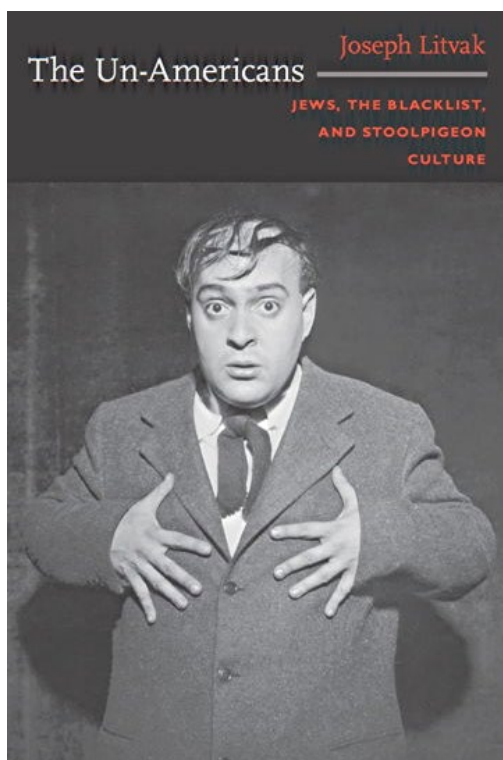
Zero Mostel on the cover of Litvak's book. In the HUAC hearings, as Litvak has indicated, the sharpest fencing with inquisitors came almost exclusively from Jews who would not name names (Lillian Hellman, Judy Holliday, Zero Mostel, Lionel Stander, etc.).

The unquiet memory of the Hollywood Blacklist

review by Clay Steinman

- Alan Casty, *Communism in Hollywood: The Moral Paradoxes of Testimony, Silence, and Betrayal* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2009).
- Joseph Litvak, *The Un-Americans: Jews, the Blacklist, and Stoolpigeon Culture* (Series Q) (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

During the Cold War, the U.S. film industry's anti-Communist blacklist cost hundreds their jobs, from November 1947 until at least January 1960, when it first openly cracked. Few topics in U.S. film history spark such divisive debate, or evoke deeper considerations of cultural politics and individual morality. Stakes remain high, even after the Cold War, as the right continues to produce a trumped-up mise-en-scène of fear, demonizing enemies foreign and domestic who dare to propose that another world is possible. During the run-up to the 2010 elections, for example, the National Republican Campaign Committee ran ads that sought support against "Socialism" on the mobile version of www.nytimes.com, as if this were the 1950s with cell phones. Similar charges were made against President Obama in the following campaign.[1] [open endnotes in new window]

There they go again: the Republicans and anti-socialist scare tactics in 2012.

In this context, with U.S. politics so riven still, histories cannot but be interventions, as these two recent books attest.[2] Alan Casty provides the first account by a film scholar to take advantage of Communist archives in Russia. Joseph Litvak interlaces queer theory and contemporary Jewish studies to rethink the meanings of blacklisting. Their work comes to contradictory conclusions: Casty finds betrayal and moral cowardice on the left while Litvak develops a new critical lens on the development of Cold War conformist culture.

First, some background. The Hollywood blacklist had counterparts in radio and television, education, government, and other institutions but not, as Litvak points out, the New York theater. While the blacklist reigned, film workers were fired for being "unfriendly" witnesses, refusing to testify against themselves or others before

the U.S. House Committee on Un-American Activities. Those blacklisted, some only for reported Communist associations, lost their jobs not on orders from the U.S. government but because Hollywood's financial powers feared losses to anti-Communist boycotts and increased government regulation. Postwar profits were already in decline. As Ed Sullivan wrote in his Nov. 29, 1947 column in the *New York Daily News*: the blacklist began once "Wall Street jiggled the strings."[3]

Publicity still (with the three Roberts--Ryan, Mitchum, and Young) from the anti-anti-Semitic/anti-fascist Crossfire (released July 22, 1947). Both director Edward Dmytryk and producer Adrian Scott two months later made uncooperative (called "unfriendly") appearances before the U.S. House Committee on Un-American Activities and went to prison as members of the Hollywood Ten. Dmytryk became a cooperative ("friendly") witness April 25, 1951, and resumed directing. Scott's career never recovered.

Ayn Rand, a friendly witness before HUAC Oct. 20, 1947. Asked by a committee member, "Doesn't anybody smile in Russia any more?," she replied: "Well, if you ask me literally, pretty much no... If they do, it is privately and accidentally."

Abraham Polonsky, an unfriendly witness on April 21, 1951 who was blacklisted until the mid-1960s.

Ronald Reagan, then president of the Screen Actors Guild, a friendly HUAC witness, Oct. 23, 1947.

Walt Disney, a friendly witness, Oct. 24, 1947.

Dalton Trumbo, before the blacklist the most financially successful of the Hollywood Ten and the first allowed screen credit, in 1960 for *Spartacus*. Shown here resisting HUAC, Oct. 28, 1947.

John Garfield in *Force of Evil* (1949) (publicity still). Garfield testified April 23, 1951. He told HUAC he had never himself been a Communist, but he refused to name names and was blacklisted. He made no more films. He died a year later of a heart attack at 39. The film was co-authored and directed by Abraham Polonsky.

Rightwing politicians had their own incentives to attack the Hollywood left: easy publicity, especially when stars testified, and a chance to frame progressive activity and beliefs as essentially if covertly Communist and pro-Soviet, thereby subversive and anti-American. The right's goal was to put a stake in the heart of any remnants of the New Deal coalition. As the HUAC hearings and the consequent firings hit their stride in 1951, only one escape hatch remained for those called to testify who wanted to keep their jobs: waive their constitutional right against self-incrimination and participate in what Victor Navasky in his influential *Naming Names* calls a "degradation ceremony" (319). This meant denouncing one's political past, and offering up to HUAC the names of former comrades—in short, becoming "friendly."[4]

Zero Mostel (right), with Jack Palance, in a publicity still for the pro-public health *Panic in the Streets* (1950), directed by Elia Kazan. On April 10, 1952, Kazan testified as a friendly witness before a HUAC sub-committee, identifying former colleagues from the New York theater who had been Communists. Mostel was a creatively unfriendly witness on Aug. 15, 1955. He had been blacklisted in movies since early 1952 and did not work in the industry again until 1966.

The Hollywood Ten and their families at a rally as their 1950 imprisonment approached for contempt of Congress, following unfriendly testimony in October 1947. The Hollywood Ten tried—and failed—to stand on their First Amendment rights. Later HUAC opponents pled the Fifth Amendment to avoid testifying against others and as a result were blacklisted but avoided prison.

Robert Rossen, director of *Body and Soul* (1947), written by Abraham Polonsky and starring John Garfield (see above) and Canada Lee (see next), and *All the King's Men* (1949), an unfriendly witness Jan. 25, 1951. Blacklisted for two years, Rossen turned friendly on May 7, 1953.

Canada Lee in a publicity still for *Lifeboat* (1944). In 1952, Lee died of kidney failure. He was 45 years old. Like Garfield, his friends and family believed that he had been hounded to death. He had won acclaim for starring in the 1941 Orson Welles production of Richard Wright's *Native Son* in New York and had a developing career in Hollywood before anti-Communist organizations intensified attacks against him in the late 1940s and he suddenly had difficulty finding work in the United States.

The blacklisted and their allies felt betrayed. For the most part, they considered informers immoral hypocrites who had fingered former friends. While there were informers who by all accounts had become sincere anti-Communists, there were also those who confessed regrets ranging to self-loathing, as Navasky recounts, offering support for the initially revisionist but now standard version of the blacklist story: political persecution, enabled by betrayal. To see the residual success of this narrative, go to Wikipedia and read "The Hollywood Blacklist," which sounds much like blacklist history told from the left. This might well drive crazy those who believe the friendly witnesses were the brave ones.

In the 1990s, the empire did indeed strike back with its own histories—or, perhaps, the repressed returned at a gallop, depending upon one's point of view. The Yale University Press Annals of Communism Series offered new disclosures of previously secret Soviet cables and previously unavailable archives of the

George C. Scott and Paul Newman in *The Hustler* (1961) (video capture), directed and co-authored by Robert Rossen. Rossen is defended by Casty in *Communism in Hollywood*.

Lillian Hellman, novelist and screenwriter, wrote HUAC May 19, 1952: "I cannot and will not cut my conscience to fit this year's fashions." In testimony May 21, 1952, she offered to discuss herself but not others. HUAC insisted on names, she pled the Fifth Amendment and was blacklisted for nearly a decade.

Communist Party USA. Although the CPUSA long ago had shipped its archives to the Soviet Union to prevent them from being seen by political enemies, the papers have had a half-life in post-Communist Russian hands that intermittently has allowed for their inspection. They do support elements of the right's traditional story of CPUSA subservience to Stalinism. Anyone who cares about left history and politics, in Hollywood or in general, needs to reckon with this material. However, the authors/editors in the Yale series tend to see the archives' raw data through an anti-Communist lens that discounts readings that might value at least some of the contributions of Communist activists to the period's progressive struggles.[5] Like most accounts, the series also shortchanges the contributions of African Americans to the Party's history, which leaves a crucial gap for understanding the context for the blacklist, especially for recognizing the racial politics that motivated the anti-Communist Southern Dixiecrats powerful on HUAC.[6]

Drawing upon the Yale Annals and related findings, Alan Casty proposes what might be called a counter-revisionist history of the blacklist. He is no fan of HUAC nor of the blacklist. Nevertheless, his book sizzles with hatred of Communism. He cannot abide the narrative that makes heroes of the blacklist's victims. Casty argues that those who refused to testify and denounce Communism were complicit with the horrors of Soviet Communism, for by not cooperating with HUAC they "cooperated in a process that was slaughtering and imprisoning millions of people" (15, 242-253). For him, the heroes are the informers, who deserve the high ground for speaking out against Communism and giving HUAC names, even if they did cost hundreds their jobs and contribute to the climate of fear of McCarthyism. Overall, he seeks to turn Navasky's anti-informer moral framework on its head.

Soviet Communism's horrors are undeniable; the problem lies in Casty's unexplored assumptions in holding the blacklisted accountable. Covering the Hollywood Communists with blood as he does requires more evidence and an argument more sensitive to the conflicting forces and complicated choices of the times than Casty provides. The Yale volumes tend to offer little flavor of the experiences and self-understandings of rank-and-file U.S. Communists and their allies, who after all were almost entirely uninvolved with, indeed were unaware of, the secret international machinations the archives disclose. Were ordinary U.S. Communists responsible for the miseries caused far from their shores yet in their names? Are we in the United States responsible for the miseries our taxes and acquiescence make possible and that occurred and continue to occur in our names?

Communism in Hollywood seems designed not only to oppose Navasky's moral critique of informing but also to defend Robert Rossen, the talented writer-director who became an informer, against "vituperative personal attacks on him as a man, not only as a filmmaker" (14). Rossen, who died in 1966 and about whom Casty wrote a helpful monograph,[7] worked on socially critical films both when he was connected to the Communist Party (e.g., *Marked Woman, They Won't Forget, Body and Soul, All the King's Men*) and after he named more than fifty names (*The Hustler*). Casty twice maintains, defensively, that almost all of the cooperative witnesses provided HUAC with names it already had (15, 225), although why that should matter if the informers were heroes remains unclear. Unaccountably, he fails to test one of Navasky's most telling arguments: that informants' claims that they only named people previously identified, thus hurting no one new, turned out "much of the time . . . to be false" (281). Casty's anti-Communism may be ambrosia to those who share his political tastes, but the book is unfortunately undersourced when it attributes private motives to friendly and unfriendly alike.

Inflected throughout by contemporary cultural theory, Litvak's book could scarcely differ more from Casty's. Indeed, Litvak says outright his is not yet another history.
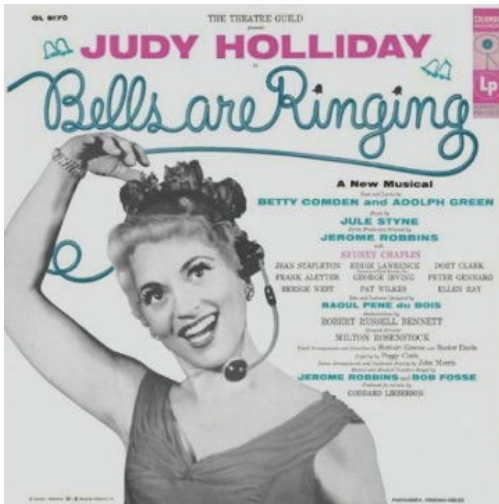
Judy Holliday on the cover of the original Broadway cast album for *Bells are Ringing* (1956-1958). Her testimony was an example of what Litvatk called "comicosmopolitanism."

Lionel Stander (lower right), resisting HUAC during his appearance on May 6, 1953. He was blacklisted until 1963 and did not work regularly again in the United States until the 1970s.

Lionel Stander speaking at a UCLA student strike against rearmament in April 1937.

Instead, he gives us a craftily organized disorderly form, which I mean as a compliment. Despite its gravity regarding the individual and social harm caused by Cold War anti-Communism, *The Un-Americans* offers readers a festive scavenger hunt, streaked with *Yiddishkeit* (remnants of a time when Jews were still outsiders in the United States) and stocked with insight into the blacklist's cloudy cultural terrain and legacies. Litvak from the start pledges his allegiance to those who resist the order of things. He is particularly wonderful on the Jewish-queer resonances of 1947's *Crossfire* and *Body and Soul*; and dazzling are his readings of Broadway's 1943 *Oklahoma!* and 1956 *Bells are Ringing* with Judy Holliday. He sees as exemplary the blacklisted witnesses who refused to behave according to HUAC's project, rules, and sense of decorum, Lionel Stander perhaps above all.[8] He likens Stander's exchanges with Rep. Harold H. Velde (D- IL), HUAC chair, to the Groucho Marx-Margaret Dumont banter in Marx Bros. films.

With an eye for the comic and complex in the excerpts from testimony that he quotes, and deft swings up and down analytical levels, Litvak has written an unruly text that sympathetic readers fluent in theory may well experience with what Litvak names "en-Jewment." This he defines as delight in recognition of residual old-country forms not yet renovated for purposes of commodification (e.g., 3, 6-12). He sees these forms still undisciplined by the standards of conventional white gentility —of body, dress, humor, sexuality, voice—mocking dominant codes, wittingly or not. This applies even to Litvak's endnotes, some of which, in a master flip, seem more primary than his text.

Litvak displays a far more nuanced understanding of the Hollywood Communists than Casty, an understanding of which I can only offer a sample here. For example, he notes that a "wildly disproportionate" number of those blacklisted were Jews (109); the sharpest fencing with inquisitors came almost exclusively from Jews who would not name names (Lillian Hellman, Holliday, Zero Mostel, Stander, etc.). For Litvak the blacklisted were most provocative in their "comicosmopolitanism." This subversive concatenation he regards as "more a matter of unintended meanings and of performative implications than of explicit and ethical belief" that threatens the monoculturally Christian, white nationalist, hetero-masculinist, and market-individualist rules of the game (3). Casty's heroes, dutifully or self-servingly naming names, exemplify a type Litvak calls the "sycophant," especially if they were Jews. Transplanting a concept developed by Alain Badiou, Litvak uses the term to describe participants in Cold War conformity that "works to strip the word 'Jew,' as well as particular Jews in American culture" of their *Yiddishkeit* "radicalness" (20).

Yet you don't have to be Jewish to love (or resist) the powers that be. Indeed, sycophancy applies to the domestication of whatever difference sticks in authority's craw. That could involve being differently sexed, or radical, or militantly feminist or pro-union or anti-racist, or a member or supporter of the CPUSA. That difference could even mean being what the right called a "premature anti-fascist," an active supporter of anti-fascist struggles such as the Spanish Civil War before the start of World War II, because it meant being allied with reds. Litvak notes that the Hollywood blacklist combined disciplinary acts against workers with old-fashioned fear—here, unemployability and, for those who directly resisted HUAC, incarceration. He also makes the incisive point that the intimidation and control

Edward G. Robinson, "graylisted" witness, from *The Red House* (1947) (video capture).

powered by the blacklist keeps going still, ever energized by those it most benefits. This permanent blacklist is the ordinary discipline of capitalism. Neither Hollywood nor the system generally can abide a comicosmopolitanism inconsistent with the commodity value of its finished products, and no one will be hired who refuses to do the work assigned.

Even amidst their personal and political distress, those blacklisted half a century ago had a range of movements and a socialist vision to nurture them. In the United States today, the radical left, its organizations mostly pulverized by the state after decades of Cold War, its vision tattered by the toxic failures of hierarchical Leninism, may show sporadic energy. Yet the radical left has little institutionalized community or culture within which to organize and respond, no shared sense of that different world awaiting birth from within the old, no shared map for finding a way to the other side. The blacklist and the movements and institutions that defined its course offer ample negative lessons. Still, the period was too rich to be left only to its failings. Perhaps in histories such as Litvak's that playfully anticipate life without blacklists, that imagine connection and courage and critical wisdom, future comicosmopolitans will find traces of paths to link to their own.

Go to notes page

Notes

1. http://www.newt.org/news/gingrich-obama%E2%80%99s-%E2%80%98bureaucratic-socialism%E2%80%99-driving-down-economy; http://thehill.com/video/campaign/194665-perry-obama-is-a-socialist; http://nymag.com/daily/intel/2011/12/even-romney-now-says-obama-is-a-socialist.html.
[return to page 1 of essay]

2. The standard (anti-)blacklist history remains Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund's *The Inquisition in Hollywood: Politics in the Film Community, 1930-1960* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press-Doubleday, 1980). Among other important contributions are

- Victor Navasky's *Naming Names* (New York: Viking Press, 1980), for me a cherished book of moral instruction,
- Patrick McGilligan and Paul Buhle's *Tender Comrades: A Backstory of the Hollywood Blacklist* (New York: St. Martin's Press-Griffin, 1997),
- Mike Nielsen and Gene Mailes's *Hollywood's Other Blacklist: Union Struggles in the Studio System* (London: British Film Institute, 1995),
- Gerald Horne's *Class Struggle in Hollywood 1930-1950: Moguls, Mobsters, Stars, Reds, & Trade Unionists* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), and
- Thom Andersen's 1985 essay, "Red Hollywood," and his recent Afterword, both included in
- the anthology *"Un-American" Hollywood: Politics and Film in the Blacklist Era* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007), edited by Frank Krutnik, Steve Neale, Brian Neve, and Peter Sanfield, 225-275.

Andersen raises important questions about the standard version, emphasizing how the film work of the blacklisted mattered, and insisting upon discussing film in terms of the politics of aesthetic design. Of the latest generation of academic writings on the topic, John Joseph Gladchuk's *Hollywood and Anticommunism: HUAC and the Evolution of the Red Menace, 1935-1950* (New York: Routledge, 2007) hews closest to the viewpoints of the blacklisted themselves, and Reynold Humphries's *Hollywood's Blacklists: A Political and Cultural History* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008) provides a short but incisive overview that can serve well as an introduction. For the center-right, the most favored account (Amazon blurbs by John Patrick Diggins, Richard Schickel, and Tom Wolfe) seems to be Ronald Radosh and

Allis Radosh, *Red Star Over Hollywood: The Film Colony's Long Romance With the Left* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2005).

For a treasure chest of rare blacklist-related documents, see the Gutenberg-e online version of Jennifer E. Langdon's *Caught in the Crossfire: Adrian Scott and the Politics of Americanism in 1940s Hollywood* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), http://www.gutenberg-e.org/langdon/index.html. Langdon has done an enormous, generous service for all students and scholars of the period.

3. Qtd. by John Cogley, *Report on Blacklisting I: Movies* (New York: Fund for the Republic, 1956), 23.

4. Selected non-Communist, progressive activists in the industry were also forced to testify. Even if they denounced their past, if they did not name names, they tended anyway to have trouble finding work, as did those named by others but not called to testify. For a case history of this "graylisting," see Steven J. Ross, "Little Caesar and the HUAC Mob: Edward G. Robinson," *Hollywood Left and Right: How Movie Stars Shaped American Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 89-130. On the severe personal costs for Robinson, see Michael Freedland with Barbara Paskin, *Hollywood on Trial: McCarthyism's War Against the* Movies (London: Robson Books, 2007), 169-171. For a fascinating quantitative study of Hollywood blacklisting, see Elizabeth Pontikes, Giacomo Negro, and Hayagreeva Rao, "Stained Red: A Study of Stigma by Association to Blacklisted Artists During the 'Red Scare' in Hollywood, 1945 to 1960," *American Sociological Review* 75.3 (2010), 456-478. A conclusion worth quoting:

> "Our findings help explain why, even though a very small fraction of Hollywood artists were directly targeted for blacklisting, many more were victims through stigma by association. This process had many false positives—and these false positives created further panic that allowed conservative politicians to exact compliance from a large sector of the economy. We looked at one aspect of compliance, excluding people from jobs, but there were others too—films that might have been critical of America were not made; films that took a positive view of American power were made" (475).

5. See, for example, note 6 below. Even with such reservations, I found harrowing and recommend *The Soviet World of American Communism*, by Harvey Klehr, John Earl Haynes, and Kyrill M. Anderson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

6. In *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), Robin D. G. Kelley offers insider perspectives on black-led, multi-racial Party work on the ground (providing a backdrop for Denzel Washington's 2007 *The Great Debaters*, written by Robert Eisele].

7. *The Films of Robert Rossen* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1969).

8. He also praises Holliday, whose clever performance before the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee in 1952 is discussed in detail by Milly S. Barranger in "Billie Dawn Goes to Washington: Judy Holliday," *Unfriendly Witnesses: Gender, Theater, and Film in the McCarthy Era* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 9-33. Also see Will Holtzman, *Judy Holliday* (New York: Putnam, 1982), 141-168. Worth mentioning is that both Holliday and Edward G. Robinson, two of Hollywood's brightest actors, dissembled for investigating committees by playing dumb.

Feminist film history books

reviewed by Diane Waldman

Vicki Callahan (ed), *Reclaiming the Archive: Feminism and Film History*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010. $29.95 paper. 472 pages.

Suzanne Leonard, *Fatal Attraction*. Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009. $77.95 hardcover; $21.95 paper. 141 pages.

Sarah Bernhardt's *Hamlet*: defending the experimental nature of Bernhardt's work and of cinema when still strongly tied to theater.

What does feminist film history and criticism look like at the end of the first decade of the 21st century? Two recent books, one a large, multi-authored anthology, and one a single-authored volume on a single film, give us an excellent idea.

Vicki Callahan's edited collection *Reclaiming the Archive* is an ambitious and comprehensive work. After a thoughtful general introduction, the book is divided into four sections: "Gazing Outward: The Spectrum of Feminist Reception History," "Rewriting Authorship," "Excavating Early Cinema," and "Constructing a (Post)feminist Future." Each section's introduction maps out previous feminist approaches to the subject matter and describes how the section's contributors build upon, challenge, or advance prior conceptualizations or debates.

In her introduction Callahan sets out her goals for the volume and the central themes and metaphors that organize her concept of the archive and what it means to reclaim it for the political project(s) of feminism. Thus the book is meant to intervene in both film history and feminist studies as traditionally practiced, to demonstrate the diversity of approaches possible within feminist film history, to broaden the discussion beyond the usual Anglo-American context to an inclusion of other cinemas, and to deal with an "expansive chronological terrain (from early cinema to postfeminist texts)" (2).

In this short space I can only give what I hope are some tantalizing glimpses of the ways in which the essays in the collection deliver on these promises. Several of the essays demonstrate the ways in which the judgments of traditional film history are altered when viewed through the lens of feminism. Both Victoria Duckett's work on Sarah Bernhardt's *Hamlet* and Amy Shore's on *Votes for Women* show how film history's "failures" (the Phono-Cinéma-Théâtre and the Edison

Ayako Wakao in *Floating Weeds*: women's performances have shaped critically renowned work usually attributed to a (male) director's genius.

Germaine Dulac has an anti-fascist affinity with

kinetophone, respectively) become something else again when viewed from the standpoint of the women involved in their use. Not only does Duckett convincingly argue for the experimental nature of Bernhardt's work but for a time when film had not yet distinguished itself from the other arts by denigrating its "theatrical" elements. Similarly, Shore demonstrates the ways in which *Votes for Women* was not merely a cinematic "flop," but part of a concerted strategy on the part of the militant Women's Political Union to engage with the visual culture of modernity and to challenge cinema's patriarchal tendencies in order to advance the cause of suffrage. Terri Simone Francis ingeniously links a staple of early cinema history (*Uncle Josh at the Moving Picture Show*) to recent representations of "unruly" black female spectatorship in *Scream 2* and *Scary Movie*:

> "The film sheds light on a potentially critical, performative spectatorship in which misrepresented or underrepresented viewers claim powers of looking back and recalibrating norms of cinematic desire to their own advantage" (117).

The collection amply demonstrates a diversity of approaches and methods: some of the essays are more textually-based, others more contextual or ethnographic, most an intriguing combination of the two, as in Ayako Saito's reading of films such as *Tsuma wa kokuhaku suru* (A wife confesses) and interviews with Ayako Wakao to demonstrate how the representations of women in what are usually described as "Masumura's films" are shaped by Wakao's interpretation and performance. Interestingly, several of the essays in the collection include in their analyses films that point reflexively to earlier films, cinema-going or fandom:

- Annette Kuhn's reference to *Sally in Our* Alley and *Sing As We Go* in her essay on the role of cinema culture in the formation of British women in the 1930s,
- Sumiko Higashi's analysis of *The Picture Idol* (1912) in her discussion of the development of stars and fandom as evidence of the transformation of the self in the early years of the 20th century,
- Michele Schreiber's analysis of contemporary romantic comedies

Virginia Woolf.

Lupita Tovar in *Santa*, an early Mexican sound film with an unique figuration of femininity and modernity.

LOIS WEBER, Producer
Releasing thru F. B. Warren Corp
32

Lois Weber, pioneering U.S. woman director and producer.

that reference earlier romance films to deal nostalgically with postfeminist dilemmas.

And several of these writers are reflexive about their *own* moment of historical writing. In this way, Laura Mulvey reflects upon the reasons for textually-based film studies in Britain in the 1970s and argues that new ways of consuming old films (video or DVD) "have brought me to reconsider my 1970s theories of spectatorship" (30). Similarly casting a glance back, Patricia White writes about the ways in which a 1990s fascination with "lesbian chic" permits the availability of new kinds of archival materials and allows us to recognize the role played by homoeroticism in the movie fandom of earlier eras. Most of these essays make innovative use of a variety of primary source materials: films, screenplays, trade and fan magazines, newspaper articles, obituaries, interviews, letters, diaries, photographs, posters. Some contributors are quite thoughtful about what their source materials do or do not reveal (Giuliana Muscio's essay on women screenwriters in American silent cinema is exemplary in this regard). Others, like Sandy Flitterman-Lewis's poignant piece on anti-fascist affinities between Virginia Woolf and Germaine Dulac remind us of the intuitive ways in which historians' work often initiate and proceed.

True to its goals the collection maintains a strong international presence. In addition to the essays previously mentioned, included are Geneviève Sellier's piece on the representation of women in films of the Nouvelle Vague, Joanne Hershfield's chapter on early Mexican sound film *Santa*'s figuration of femininity and modernity, and Soyoung Kim's discussion of a local feminist sphere operating against the blockbuster and in and through new forms of media in Korea. As for the "expansive chronological terrain," the organization of the book places more emphasis on early cinema (and in addition to essays previously mentioned there are strong essays that deal wholly or at least in part with early cinema by Janet Staiger on the fallen woman and Shelley Stamp on Lois Weber) and contemporary cinema/new media (in addition to those previously mentioned there are essays by Yvonne Tasker on women filmmakers and contemporary notions of authorship, Anna Everett on cyberfeminism and cyberwomanism, and Callahan's own contribution, an interview with multimedia/performance artist Lynn Hershman Leeson). This coverage is not necessarily a weakness as it provides a balance to the classical Hollywood cinema already mined (to continue the excavation metaphor) by an earlier generation of feminist film historians. Additionally, essays in the sections on reception and authorship deal with the periods in between early and contemporary cinema. In addition to the essays mentioned previously, Suzanne Leonard has an interesting piece on the ideological work done by the discourse surrounding the love affair of Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton.

If I have one disagreement with *Reclaiming the Archive* it is with the centrality of Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" in Callahan's account of the so-called "turn to history" in feminist film studies. While I might agree with Janet Bergstrom and Mary Ann Doane that Mulvey's essay represented "the inaugural moment – the condition of possibility – of an extended theorization of the female spectator" ("The Spectatrix," *Camera Obscura* 20-21, 1989, cited by Callahan, 3), my own research and memory tell me that much good

feminist historical research was done *before* the publication of Mulvey's ground-breaking essay in 1975: for example in *Women and Film* (1972-1976), *The Velvet Light Trap* (1971-) and *Jump Cut* (1974-). Even within the volume itself, Flitterman-Lewis refers to a booklet on Germaine Dulac, part of which she translated for *Women and Film* in 1974. At any rate, a statement such as, "In many ways, one might say that feminist film history begins in 1975 with Laura Mulvey's essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,'" threatens to reify this particular version of feminist film studies history, and it seems contradictory to the otherwise generous spirit of the collection as

> "intended as a correction to a kind of historical amnesia *within our own history as feminist film scholars*" (4).

In her essay in *Reclaiming the Archive* Mulvey theorizes the relation between film text and context that now informs her own understanding and that of many of the contributors to the volume:

> "This process has continued to expand and broaden the scope of film studies so that a film may be understood, Janus-like, as both deeply imbricated with its surrounding context but also finding a formal visualization for that context through its own, specific, cinematic and dramatic form. To my mind the form in which a social context is translated into the language of cinema, the ways in which it finds its meanings and representation in images ordered and organized within a cinematic narrative, works in this double direction. While the cinema reflects the society that produces it, its mediating images, forms, and cinematic language contribute to the way a society understands and internalizes itself as image." (19)

It is this type of understanding that also governs *Reclaiming*'s contributor Suzanne Leonard's smart, engaging, and passionately argued book on *Fatal Attraction* (1987). As Leonard explains in her introduction,

Fatal Attraction as a "zeitgeist film."

> "*Fatal Attraction's* exposé of a man who embarks on a casual affair which later reveals itself to have disastrous consequences also had deep resonance in its historical moment, and *Fatal Attraction* quickly became understood as a zeitgeist film for its skillful treatment of cultural anxieties regarding career women, sexuality, employment, and infidelity" (1).

The book's organization follows this premise, beginning first with textual analysis of the ways the film generates suspense and its central motifs, then moving on to a discussion of the film's genre hybridity and the way it is a "postmodern montage" (35) of the melodrama, horror film, neo-noir, and erotic thriller. Not content merely to catalogue the ways in which the film follows different kinds of generic conventions, Leonard demonstrates how viewing the film through the lens of each genre opens it up to alternative kinds of readings. For example, she

shows how viewing the film as a melodrama creates the possibility for sympathy for the film's otherwise monstrous antagonist, Alex Forrest, and a reading of the ending as something other than a conservative endorsement of family values.

The next three chapters of Leonard's book address the film's cultural context directly. Chapter 3 discusses the 1980s feminist response to this depiction of the single career woman in the context of Reagan-era backlash; Chapter 4, the way the film's "obsession with the deadly consequences of sex had a clear socioeconomic subtext" (88) and promotes a distrustful, privatized, neoliberal agenda. The last chapter of the book alone is worth its price for the thoughtful way Leonard sketches out the legacy of *Fatal Attraction* and the figure of Alex Forrest for a postfeminist age. Beginning with an analysis of the reference to the film in *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001), Leonard sees Alex as "a spectral figure in female popular culture" who

> "lives in perpetuity as an unfortunate woman who does not secure a companion..." (110).

Fatal Attraction, through Leonard's skillful analysis, provides a perfect illustration of the way in which "a social context is translated into the language of cinema" and

> "the way its mediating images, forms, and cinematic language contribute to the way a society understands and internalizes itself as image" (see quote from Mulvey above).

In short,

> "Alex contributed to *creating* the reality she is credited with *reflecting*" (111);

> "her presence codified an anxiety that became all the more real...as a result of her appearance on the popular culture landscape" (112).

This book, like Callahan's collection, clearly demonstrates the continued relevance and importance of feminist approaches to film, media, and popular culture for a new generation of scholars, students, and other interested readers.

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Largely unwatched in traditional theaters, *Grindhouse* had some limited success at the few drive-ins remaining (as here in Austin, home of Rodriguez's Troublemaker Studios).

"The lesser of the attractions": *Grindhouse* and theatrical nostalgia

by Kevin Esch

"There's another reason that *Grindhouse* is, for some of us misfits, such a happy trip. It affirms our sense of community…. I'm sad that most people will see *Grindhouse* on video. It should be consumed (or, depending on your perspective, endured) in a theater full of shrieking, gasping, cheering, borderline-ashamed exploitation junkies. Nowadays, people smoke dope and drink and jerk off in front of TV screens in the privacy of their homes. They really need to get out more."
—David Edelstein, "Blood and Guts. No Urine"[1]
[open endnotes in new window]

"…[O]nce upon a time there were theatres where the movies were the lesser of the attractions."
—*Land of a Thousand Balconies: Discoveries and Confessions of a B-Movie Archaeologist*[2]

Exhibition posters for *Grindhouse* nostalgically evoked an outmoded era of film exhibition …

The Weinstein Company's high-profile marketing campaign for *Grindhouse* (2007), Quentin Tarantino and Robert Rodriguez's $67 million nostalgic ode to exploitation double features, was notable for two not unrelated things: its frequent need to explain the term "grindhouse" to potential viewers, and its inability to prevent an equally high-profile collapse at the box office (a lowly $11.6 million on opening weekend, $25.4 million worldwide overall). The film's poor showing resulted in many critics wondering whether the studio had overestimated filmgoers' interest in grindhouse cinema.[3] In the subsequent DVD release, the studio backed away from the double feature exhibition experiment: *Planet Terror* and *Death Proof* have appeared on separate "extended edition" DVDs, but without most of the accompanying *faux* trailers, advertisements, and "X-rated" warnings that surrounded the features and announced the project as something more than just another big-budget neo-exploitation film. Only after years of fans' complaints about the unavailability of the theatrical version (except as an expensive 6-disc Japanese
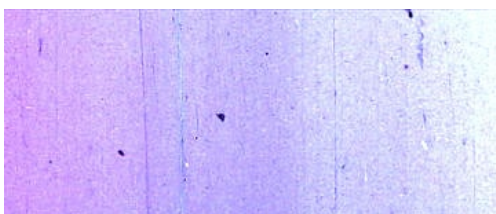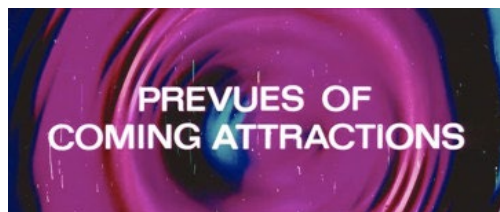
Cut abruptly to the vintage "coming attractions" leader, familiar to fans that have seen Tarantino's *Kill Bill* films. Here, however, it serves a purpose closer to its original intent—introducing "trailers" before the "feature."

"They called him Machete." Alone among the four trailers originally in *Grindhouse* to be eventually released as a feature film, *Machete* precedes Rodriguez's half of the double feature, *Planet Terror*. It would also be the sole trailer in the film to survive the initial transition to separate DVDs for each film.

The three trailers to play between the two features would not fare as well as *Machete*. Rob Zombie's homage to the 1975 Nazi exploitation classic *Ilsa, She Wolf of the SS* would disappear in the DVD releases …

import containing both the theatrical and the individual extended versions) was it at last released in the U.S. on Blu-ray in 2010. Surveying this state of affairs in 2008, Caetlin Benson-Allott boldly but justifiably lamented in her review essay on the film, "*Grindhouse*, grindhouses, and indeed theatrical exhibition itself are now dead."[4]

Occupying a period between the end of the studio-owned theater and the rise of the corporate multiplex, the grindhouse era of U.S. film exhibition has all but disappeared from the cinematic landscape—and, judging from *Grindhouse*'s dismal box-office failure, from moviegoers' minds as well. My own experience going to see *Grindhouse* echoes this sea change. I had planned to see the film at the Prytania Theater, the only neighborhood theater left in New Orleans. It felt fitting to see *Grindhouse* amidst the Prytania's walls of old New Orleans theater photos, the aging balcony, and the dusty organ pushed to one side of the screen. When I arrived one weekend afternoon to catch a matinee, however, I was disappointed to discover that the theater had been rented out for the evening; but by then I was determined to still see the film, so I drove out to a suburban megaplex. I walked through the lobby, dominated by several enormous black-and-white photos evoking a "golden age" of movie palaces in sad contrast to my current surroundings. Then, joining in the routine shared by most U.S. moviegoers today, I sat in my comfortable stadium seat and watched the movie in a nearly empty theater, a bit guilty that I had abandoned the charismatic dilapidation of New Orleans for this sterile setting. I felt like I had traded history and community for banal commerce.

In this article I wish to examine how, despite the filmmakers' painstaking strategies for recreating the grindhouse experience in a multiplex environment, the film's box-office failure stemmed in part from its nostalgic tone—a nostalgia less for exploitation films themselves (which has served Tarantino and Rodriguez well in past films) than for the theatrical and social experience of grindhouse. The nostalgia of *Grindhouse* attempts to offer a progressive critique of the business practices of late capitalist cinema-going and exhibition, one that ultimately fails because of the film's inescapable place within Hollywood's political economy—an economy exemplified by that compromised DVD release of the film.

I argue that *Grindhouse*'s nostalgia operates on two levels, both in its desire to look like an old, damaged film print and in its "cheesy" nostalgia for dated racial representations. First, a nostalgia for disrepair (as Benson-Allott has also noted) is evident in the film's aesthetic of decay, simulating celluloid damage and reels "missing" from the projection, as if one were viewing it at an actual grindhouse. This "decay" diverges from the modern multiplex's attempts to mask film's instability and fragility and thus create an economy of continual newness. Second, the film's nostalgia for grindhouse theaters as a truly alternative (if troubled) form of spectatorship—where social interaction frequently supplants the film as the featured attraction— shows up indirectly in its self-consciously "cheesy" aesthetic. Annalee Newitz has compellingly argued that at the heart of what most of us consider cheesy—an aesthetic related to but distinct from "campy" or "corny"—is an ironic sublimation of racial and ethnic tensions (just as gender difference is the root of camp).[5] Through these representations, *Grindhouse* addresses the lack of meaningful social interaction and contemplation, particularly across race and class, in the modern cinema itself.

Despite the increased attention film studies has paid to theaters and audiences in recent years, the grindhouse has received scant attention. Eric Schaefer's invaluable study of exploitation cinema, *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!*, devotes one chapter to exhibition issues but deals only with what Schaefer calls the classical period, ending in 1959. In fact, his book is clearly meant as a corrective to the popular notion that exploitation filmmaking began in the 1950s and 1960s with American International Pictures and other groups.[6] Douglas Gomery's major exhibition history, *Shared Pleasures*, spends a chapter on segregated black theaters through the late 1960s, concluding with two pages on the *de facto* African-American theaters in urban centers in the 1970s.[7] Other recent anthologies on exhibition and moviegoing contain no entries on grindhouse at all.[8] The subject has largely been left to aficionados and amateur anthropologists, each of whom exhibits clear nostalgia for a

… along with Edgar Wright's trailer *Don't*, an ode to the Hammer House of Horror films …

… and *Thanksgiving*, from Tarantino acolyte and *Hostel* director Eli Roth, a slasher film set in Plymouth, Massachusetts. All of these trailers would eventually be restored in the 2010 Blu-ray release of the theatrical version.

Concluding the trailer of *Machete* is a persuasively vintage logo for The Weinstein Company, formed by Harvey and Bob Weinstein in 2005 following Miramax's sale to Disney. The Weinstein Company owns Dimension Pictures, producers of *Grindhouse*.

Both features are prefaced by "X" rating notices, a contrast to *Grindhouse*'s actual "R" rating and another reminder of the vastly different theatrical context in which you are watching the film.

lost mode of moviegoing.[9] Freed from the constraints of academic prose, these authors often color their nostalgia in purple, as in the introduction to *Grindhouse: The Forbidden World of "Adults Only" Cinema*:

> "Grindhouses have always churned away in a seamy corner of the American psyche…. From First Avenue in Seattle to Canal Street in New Orleans, if you wanted to see all the sexy stuff that the Purity Patrol kept from the mainstream, a grindhouse always beckoned."[10]

Referring to a theatrical environment but also to the kind of films playing in it, "grindhouse" as a film term appears to date back to the 1920s, though the word also has been used to describe burlesque houses (perhaps from "grinding-house," English slang for a brothel). They were distinguished by their continuous double- or triple-feature programs of pornographic or exploitation fare, and by their disreputability, subsisting on the theatrical (and often geographic) margins, as the center was dominated by the deluxe downtown movie palaces and the second-run neighborhood theaters. In the contemporary imaginary, "grindhouse" is most frequently associated with the late 1960s and 1970s and the theaters of Times Square, as former first-run Hollywood theaters in major urban centers began to target an audience much changed in the wake of white flight to the suburbs and the first suburban mall multiplexes. Before the advent of home video, these theaters were one of the few venues for films that exploited or subverted social taboos surrounding sex, violence, and race. Tarantino enthuses about this era,

> "All the exploitation movies, women-in-prison movies, the horror films, the black-exploitation movies, all the wild stuff… the last stop before oblivion would be the grindhouse."[11]

Ironically, this enthusiasm for the unruliness of the grindhouse as a production and reception space lives on in non-theatrical markets and cult fandom groups devoted to what Jeffrey Sconce has called "paracinema"—a "most elastic textual category" encompassing not only grindhouse films but virtually all manner of exploitation or "bad" or "trash" cinema, from "mondo" and "nude cuties" to driver's-ed and sexual hygiene films to compilations of trailers, intermission announcements, and snack bar inducements.[12] Paracinematic figures like online entrepreneurs 42nd Street Pete and Something Weird Video review these films for discerning audiences and make them available on DVD, often in double- or triple-bill formats which evoke the memory of the grindhouse double feature from a more domesticated setting.[13]

Tarantino and Rodriguez clearly traffic in this kind of nostalgic feeling for the bygone experience of grindhouse cinema. (Rodriguez famously intended his debut film *El Mariachi* for the Spanish-language straight-to-video market, before it won the Audience Award at Sundance and was purchased by Columbia.) While *Grindhouse* is a joint directorial venture, I will focus here primarily on Tarantino's influence, as he is often described as an older mentor to Rodriguez and other young exploitation-savvy filmmakers such as Eli Roth. Rodriguez also confesses that Tarantino has "been educating me in grindhouse cinema for the past twelve years.[14] Up to a point, Tarantino's excitement about the margins of socially respectable cinema fits with the standard interpretation of his films.

As a director, Quentin Tarantino is depicted as the prototypical video-store brat, the first of a generation of U.S. filmmakers who learned about film not through film school—as had the previous generation whose members included Martin Scorsese, Steven Spielberg, Francis Ford Coppola, and Brian De Palma—but from clerking at video rental stores, in Tarantino's case Video Archives in Manhattan Beach, California. This kind of clerk Gerald Peary describes as
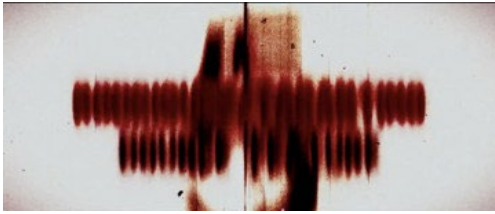
Before the first feature, *Planet Terror*, begins, we see the words "A RODRIGUEZ/ TARANTINO DOUBLE FEATURE" shimmy in the frame …

… and then resolve, as leader countdown images, dissolving celluloid (accompanied by a projector-winding-down noise) and other effects occupy the background. The total effect is an impressionistic digital simulation of film degeneration, almost an idea of what film at the end of its life might look like to a viewer for whom "old celluloid" is an iMovie menu item more than a witnessed process.

Accompanied by the sounds of twisting, tortured metal, audio fuzz, and a propulsive saxophone solo, the aggressively "damaged" title of the double feature scrolls across the screen.

"someone embarrassingly overqualified to be there, yet whose $6 an hour salary cannot dim the energy and spirit for non-stop discourse about film, film, all types of film, whether European auteurist masterpieces, Hollywood genre works, or Hong Kong kung-fu."[15]

At the well-stocked video store, one's education could easily include Italian *giallo* as well as Hawks and Welles, the Shaw Brothers alongside Bergman and Godard. For Tarantino, the result has been films whose pleasure often stems from the constant referencing of other films, from the residue of the French New Wave in *Pulp Fiction* (1994) to the casting of blaxploitation icon Pam Grier in *Jackie Brown* (1997) to Uma Thurman's yellow-and-black jumpsuit in *Kill Bill Vol. 1* (2003), a replica of the one Bruce Lee wears in *Game of Death* (Robert Clouse, HK/US, 1978). Writing about the rife intertextuality of *Kill Bill*, Chuck Stephens argues,

"Now more than ever, the moral of the cineQT [sic] is that it takes a video store to raise a child."[16]

What is often neglected in analyses of Tarantino's work but vital to understanding it is the conflicted importance he ascribes to the theatrical experience, particularly the grindhouse, in forming his outlook on film. Tarantino is well known in Hollywood for his weekly double-feature home screenings of exploitation fare, complete with vintage trailers between the films. The day his grandmother took him to the grindhouse was, he says, "one of the best days of my entire childhood," and he laments the introduction of home video and its effect on the "communal," "ritualistic" aspects of moviegoing.[17] In a 1995 conversation with director Robert Zemeckis, Tarantino expresses admiration for laser discs as an improvement over home movie watching on videotape. Even here, though, he makes an exception that suggests the continuing pull of the grindhouse on him:

"Robert Zemeckis: I'm in a constant conflict about having to make a movie for the big and the small screen at the same time, stylistically. So I just basically make it for the large screen. And I actually have a hard time watching videotapes at all. I can only watch laser discs now. Because it's getting that I can't stand…
Quentin Tarantino: The pan-and-scan?
RZ: And just the degradation of the image.
QT: I feel the exact same way. Except if I'm looking at an old exploitation film that I have on videotape, that doesn't bother me, because more than likely, when you were having the theatrical experience on that [sic], it was with a one-light projector anyway, and a big hole in the screen. [laughter]
RZ: But you don't get the experience of the wine bottle rolling down underneath the seats.
QT: No, you don't have that. And you don't have the audience going '*Yes*! Punch him again! Blow his head off!'"[18]

For Tarantino, the degraded video image evokes the gross imperfections of the projected image at the grindhouse, even if it ultimately fails to communicate the full theatrical experience.

Go to page 2

Nostalgia for disrepair
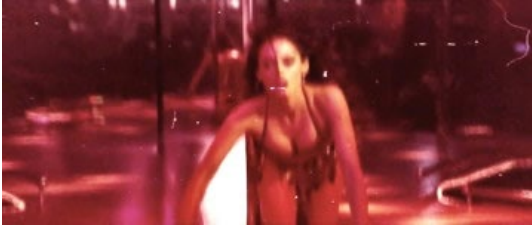
Planet Terror opens on go-go dancer Cherry Darling (Rose McGowan), accompanied by wailing saxophone.

Cherry's dancing and the saxophone scream appear to dissolve the film in front of our eyes…

… and Cherry becomes an increasingly abstract representation of female sexuality.

The nostalgic embrace of a dissolving image is what *Grindhouse* works to achieve through its loving simulation of disrepair, both in its structure and most evocatively in its digital distressing of the image. Tarantino and Rodriguez each approached the concept differently. Tarantino opted for actual manual scratching and burning of the work print (reminiscent of Woody Allen's film-aging approach in his film *Zelig* [1983]). In contrast, Rodriguez worked with a digital effects team to lift various kinds of damage residue from existing prints and then painstakingly manage the wear and tear of the film, moment by moment.[19] [open endnotes in new window] The film begins with a blank white screen accompanied by the hiss and crackle of a worn soundtrack, suggesting the hand of an inattentive or unconcerned projectionist. Soon after, an abrupt splice introduces a vintage "Prevues of Coming Attractions" leader, scratched and discolored with age. Yet another harsh splice and more blank screen brings us into a badly damaged trailer for *Machete*, directed by Rodriguez. Like the other previews in the film—Edgar Wright's haunted-house film *Don't*, Eli Roth's slasher film *Thanksgiving*, Rob Zombie's take on the short-lived Nazi exploitation genre *Werewolf Women of the S.S.*, and in selected Canadian releases of the film, the Nova Scotian Jason Eisener's vigilante-justice movie *Hobo with a Shotgun*—it announces a film that doesn't and may in fact never exist.[20]

When the go-go dancer Cherry Darling (Rose McGowan) takes the stage at the beginning of *Planet Terror*, the eroticism of her routine sends the celluloid into paroxysms, quivering in the gate and then bursting into flame. The moment may remind us of the famous final shot of Monte Hellman's car-chase film *Two-Lane Blacktop* (Monte Hellman, 1971). For Caetlin Benson-Allott, it expresses *Planet Terror*'s "celluloid affect"—as in Hellman's final shot, the film itself appears to respond materially to the images within and "cannot but get carried away by the narrative it contains."[21] While Benson-Allott specifically emphasizes the "digital scar" in *Planet Terror*, both for its narrative qualities and its echoes of the film's splatter-genre-inspired bodily damage and decay, I want to consider the disrepair of *Grindhouse* as a whole as an expression of theatrical nostalgia.

Nostalgia is a complex subject, no less so when discussing a film such as *Grindhouse*, which like many nostalgic texts seems to encompass both ends of what Paul Grainge has described as a spectrum ranging from nostalgia as *mood* to nostalgia as *mode*. The nostalgic mood is more common in popular discourse and traceable to the term's late-17th-century origins as a medical description of the homesickness soldiers experience fighting in foreign lands—the Greek *nostos* (return home) plus *algos* (pain). Feelings of loss and longing for "the way things used to be," of course, are also accompanied by selective remembrance of that idyllic past and imagined as stable in comparison to our destabilized present.[22]
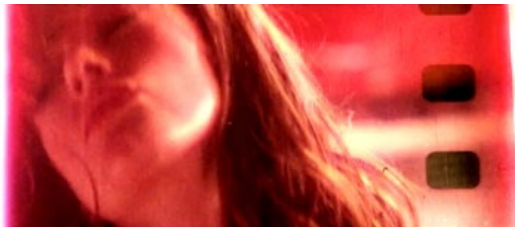
As if itself unnerved by Cherry's raw eroticism, the film stutters in the frame …

… before steadying itself for the title introduction.

The combination of Rodriguez's directorial credit, Cherry's trembling, open mouth, and a final swell of visual and audio degradation form a fitting conclusion to the opening scene.

Later in the film, when Cherry makes love to El Wray (Freddy Rodriguez), we see the frame wobble in the gate, exposing sprocket holes.

The nostalgic assemblage of images invoking multiple eras, genres and cycles that defines the past work of both Tarantino and Rodriguez (e.g. *Desperado* [1995] or *Sin City* [2005]) appears to suffer from historical amnesia, stylishly serving up a bouillabaisse of history for the eager viewer. Grainge describes this nostalgia as *mode*, writing of its relation to *mood*:

> "Nostalgic loss has been transformed into a marketable style, a kind of entertainment."[23]

The most well-known proponent of this way of thinking about nostalgia is of course Fredric Jameson, who argued against a "crisis of historicity" in a pastiche culture awash in plundered historical images without historical context.[24] Particularly worth mentioning is Jameson's account of "nostalgia films" such as *American Graffiti* (1973), with its evocation of the 1950s, and *Body Heat* (1981), a simulacrum of 1940s film noir. In neither of these films, Jameson argues, does the past represented critically engage with the present in which it is consumed. All is superficial aestheticization of the past.

It would be easy to paint *Grindhouse* with this same brush, seeing it as a tag-teaming continuation of the same principles from these two filmmakers' earlier works (and with the assistance of Edgar Wright, Eli Roth, and Rob Zombie). And there is undoubtedly a strong element of pastiche at work here—with the film's riffing on 1970s zombie movies, *Ilsa, She Wolf of the SS*, Brigitte Bardot, *Vanishing Point*, deep-cut 1950s pop music references, and so on and on. At times one could be forgiven for thinking that what we have here is simply more of the same energetic pop-culture petty larceny. I would argue, however, that Jameson's analysis of nostalgia is insufficient for understanding *Grindhouse*, which is hardly a mere "nostalgia film." Jameson has frequently been critiqued for the nostalgic tone of his own work, pining for the lost days of "genuine historicity"[25]. Furthermore, he allows no possibility that an aesthetic of nostalgia might do anything but regressively appropriate historical narrative. What of using nostalgia to *produce* critical historical narrative?

To show this critical nostalgia at work in *Grindhouse*, we must consider more closely the digital and manual effects the film uses to create the sensory impression of a badly degenerating 35mm print. The effect, for a contemporary viewer rarely exposed to prints older than a couple of months, is a startling reminder. Reels appear badly scratched, frame drops create jumpy transitions, patches of the film are bleached and tinted, and the sound (particularly unsettling for a viewer accustomed to multiplex Dolby crispness) is often muddy and distorted. Completing the picture, as it were, of a print that has been through the wringer, both films in the double feature are "missing reels" halfway through the film, replaced by title cards from the management apologizing for the inconvenience.[26] In their painstaking simulation of celluloid degradation and irresponsible exhibition, the filmmakers display their affinity for what Laura Marks calls "loving a disappearing image."

The decay of the film or video image is inherent to the viewing experience, Marks reminds us, though the modern multiplex works hard to mask or minimize it. Film history results from the excavation of that decay, for without film disintegration there would be no film history. Over time, in fact, film transforms from depths to surfaces, "from what the image represents to the complex of histories of its destruction."[27] Lucas Hilderbrand further illuminates the impact of image decay on the meaning of Todd Haynes'*Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (1987). Arguing for

Soon after, the frame seems to catch in the gate and in flagrante, and the image of Cherry's naked body …
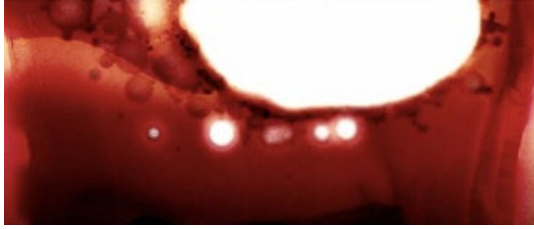
… burns away under the glare of the "lens" and the spectator …

… and is then abruptly replaced with a "Missing Reel" notice, after which we have jumped drastically ahead in the story. Missing frames and reels were a grindhouse commonplace, another sign of film disintegration (and, at times, projectionists who may have wanted sexy moments in the film for themselves).
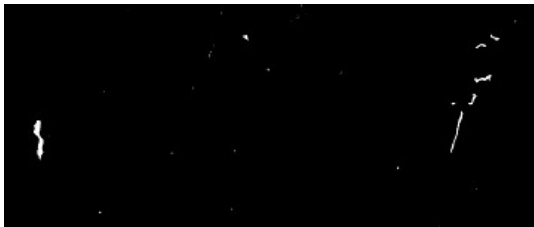
At the end of *Planet Terror*, the screen goes briefly dark and then white, for nearly fifteen awkward seconds until the trailers before *Death Proof* commence—as if the projectionist were switching lackadaisically between reels.

the film's "bootleg aesthetic," as successively degenerating video dupes are passed from viewer to viewer, Hilderbrand notes that the video de-resolution becomes metaphoric of the film's chronicle of Karen Carpenter's anorexia:

> "The film's theme becomes expressed on the tape's surfaces, even as deterioration obscures the visual and audio information, thus frustrating standard spectatorial engagement with the narrative."[28]

Hildebrand describes his own experience watching an actual 16mm print of *Superstar* for the first time, and he confesses that for him the experience felt *less* complete, not more, without the image and sound decay of his precious dub. "Analog reproduction of the text," he concludes, "rather than destroying the original's aura, actually reconstructs it."[29] Damage becomes the signature of authenticity.

Of course, the "damage" inflicted on the surfaces of *Grindhouse* is at the textual level only a cleverly wrought simulacrum. The pre-distressed product created may remind us of other fashionable goods pre-worn for our convenience, from "vintage" jeans to "shabby chic" or "antiqued" furniture. Designed to create the impression of being either discovered at a flea market or having been in one's family for generations, the *faux* patina of these products strives to hijack an ideological system of status and consumption. Patina has long been "a sign and guarantee of standing," whereas brand new goods carry "the mark of commonness."[30] The superficial marks of quality of the pre-distressed object resemble the trend towards black-and-white images in popular media during the 1990s, from Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993) to Apple's "Think different" campaign to the widespread backlash over film colorization. Paul Grainge describes this emphasis on monochrome, at a time when the United States was in the midst of the so-called "culture wars," in terms of its nostalgic appeal to more "authentic" times, before the perceived social upheaval of the present. By creating an impression that the black-and-white image has been spirited from the archives, Grainge writes that the use of black and white

> "seem[s] to efface its own relation to the sphere of capitalist simulations, sustaining the illusion that it was somehow removed from the market culture in which it was necessarily produced."[31]

Certainly, *Grindhouse*'s own visual effects also seek to instill a sense that the film arrived, as if from a miscalibrated time machine, at the multiplex, where its distressed patina is not only unwelcome but is actively suppressed by the modern theater's business practices.[32] The feeling of remove we get from *Grindhouse* is not the aura of the archive, as with Grainge's monochromatic images, but of the dustbin. *Grindhouse* replicates the fate of images that have not been reserved for time everlasting but have been cast aside and are out of time.

Time is a central measurement in the modern theatrical marketplace. Charles Acland, in his essential book on contemporary cinemagoing, proposes several "vectors of temporality"—the length of the film itself, the length of the theatrical run, and the motion picture release calendar—to help us grasp how movie theaters organize and standardize their film product for maximum return on investment.[33] The length of a film's run is of particular concern here. Increasingly shortened by the growth of DVD

Interestingly, though both films contain "missing reels," only *Death Proof* warns of this in advance. This "lost footage" was restored in the stand-alone DVD version, as well as at Cannes where the film screened on its own in competition. Rodriguez's "missing reel" was never filmed.

At the start of *Death Proof* we get a momentary glimpse of the "original" title of the film …
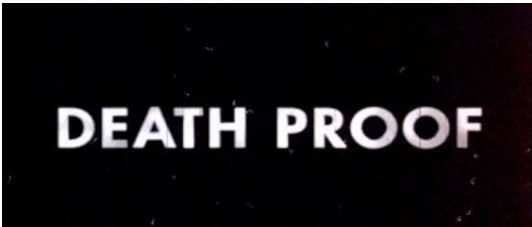
… before it is replaced with cut-in footage of the new title. This sort of retitling was common with exploitation films, often to extend a film's box-office life or evade bad press. See Schaefer's *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!*, 59-61.

A drive-by shot early in the film of the original Alamo Drafthouse theater in Austin, a storied repertory house and home for many years to QT Fest, a grindhouse film festival programmed by

and cable distribution, direct home streaming, and iTunes and pay-per-view options—together more vital to the bottom line than the theatrical run itself—a movie's brief shelf life reminds us that, more than ever, "film texts *grow old elsewhere*" (italics in original).[34] This is the existence of a product that the industry perceives but rarely admits is highly perishable, as in the story Acland relates where former Disney and DreamWorks exec Jeffrey Katzenberg compares a film's life to a supermarket tomato's. (The tomato wins.) A few university film societies and a few dozen repertory theaters nationwide—and even those regularly tout the "newly struck prints" on show—make older prints available to a specialized, typically well-educated audience. Aside from those, the educational film market (where distributing on film is less and less common) and drive-in exhibition, which in some places still serves as a second- or third-run venue, are the only vehicles where the average filmgoer today is exposed anymore to film prints that have noticeably degenerated.

The apparent damage done to the *Grindhouse* print is, in one sense, a nostalgic reminder of a previous industrial model, a less perfectly late capitalist Hollywood, when the theatrical release was not primarily the opening act for the home viewing market. It replaces what Acland calls the "ephemerality" of films under saturation-release global Hollywood with an alternate vision, one where films are removed from the wringer of late capital and put through a wringer of a different kind. *Grindhouse*'s digital decay hints at a theatre experience, largely forgotten, where films not only fall apart before one's eyes but where many films come to die—"the last stop before oblivion." Thus, Tarantino and Rodriguez's film offers an alternative, even critical, historical narrative—one that, on the film's very surface, does not aestheticize past films as much as it argues the significance of the *materiality* of past films. It is a fact Hollywood wishes we forget.

Perverse spectators at the grindhouse

Working in tandem with the nostalgic look and structure of the film is a second level of nostalgia for grindhouse spectatorship, displaced onto its cheesy, outmoded depictions of race and ethnicity. To understand this level of nostalgic discourse, we must first take a closer look at how the multiplex viewing experience differs from that of the grindhouse. I borrow the term "perverse spectators" from Janet Staiger's essay collection of the same name. For her the term admits greater complexity and deviation of response than typical cultural-studies terms like "negotiated" or "oppositional."[35] The deviation from the norm in perverse spectatorship may be politically progressive, but it also may not be. Writing about talking in the movie theater, Staiger notes that even when talk is not progressive, even when it is "quite incendiary," it can nevertheless be "binding and supportive."[36] This is an important point to emphasize about the grindhouse, which was both a site for interaction and (possible) education across lines of race and class, and a venue hostile to women both on and off the screen (even as it creates a safe space for gay male desire). Yet while Staiger and Acland both point out the potential for perverse spectatorship in the mainstream movie theater, this potential pales in comparison to the range of perverse practices and experiences (in all connotations of the word) that make up the grindhouse.

Tarantino from his own collection.

The anachronistic quality of *Death Proof*'s car chase centerpiece is heightened when the back roads give way to the highway, contrasting the muscle cars with sedate late-model sedans and minivans.

During the car chase, a drive-in sign, a relic of U.S. film exhibition akin to the grindhouse…

… meets with a violently symbolic end.

In the scene where the first trio of women encounter Julia's ironically racist "Jungle Julia" poster, Tarantino cleverly foretells their fate. The three drive down the road …

The theatrical experience Acland portrays contrasts starkly with the grindhouse milieu Rodriguez and Tarantino wish to evoke. Acland's temporal vectors help to standardize and organize film spectators in the same way they do so for the film product—on the one hand eliminating contact with aging celluloid, on the other eliminating (or at least greatly reducing) the possibility of meaningful social contact of viewers with one another. In the multiplex, standardization of start times encourages regular viewer turnover throughout the day and night, while fleeting theatrical runs provide only a brief window to see a film publicly, before it becomes a domestic activity. These temporal vectors provide an organizational and disciplinary framework for filmgoers themselves, "establishing the parameters within which audiences act, make decisions, and respond."[37] But Acland argues that, within this regimentation of the theatergoer by release dates and starting times, a great deal of possibility for individuation exists. Despite the wide range of methods designed to promote bourgeois civility and discipline in the theater—the presence of ushers and security cameras, entreaties to keep feet off the seats, to not talk, to turn off cell phones[38]—the faceless mass of servile consumers quickly breaks down through the varied and seldom-discussed practices of everyday moviegoing.

Here I want to quote at length from Acland's striking inventory of such activities:

> "Public movie performances are occasions for eating, for disregarding one's usual dietary strictures, for knowingly overpaying for too much food, for sneaking snacks and drinks, for both planned and impromptu socializing, for working, for flirting, for sexual play, for gossip, for staking out territory in theater seats, for threatening noisy spectators, for being threatened, for arguments, for reading, for talking about future moviegoing, for relaxing, for sharing in the experience of the screening with other audience members, for fleeting glimpses at possible alliances and allegiances of taste, politics, and identity, for being too close to strangers, for being crowded in your winter clothes, for being frozen by overactive air-conditioning, for being bored, for sleeping, for disappointment, for joy, for arousal, for disgust, for slouching, for hand holding, for drug taking, for standing in lines, for making phone calls, for playing video games, for the evaluation of trailers, for discussions of what preceded the film and what will follow, and for both remembering and forgetting oneself…. Here, cinemagoing is banal, it is erotic, it is civil, it is unruly; it is an everyday site of regulated and unregulated possibility."[39]

From this list it would seem that the cinema is brimming with life, rife with the prospect of chance encounters and interactions, in a way that one rarely sees anymore in your average town square. Indeed, Acland suggests that contemporary multiplexes "linger as talismans of an alternative public sphere that might have been but has not developed as yet," constrained as they are by the incentives of late capital.[40]

What kind of theatrical space results when these temporal vectors are not there to delimit the practices of theatergoers? If Acland regards life in the multiplex as "unruly" and "unregulated," perhaps he should consider the following description (again quoted at length to parallel the above):

… but then a splice seems to make them vanish. Their space on the road is then replaced…

… by the car driven by vehicular homicidal maniac Stuntman Mike (Kurt Russell). Film disintegration is here used as a storytelling device.

"The Anco was the raunchiest, most dilapidated Deuce grindhouse of them all…. At the Anco you'd base your seating choice on avoidance—a hellhole for decades, its filthy, broken chairs were a haven for a host of area criminals. Keep your eye out and you'd see needy closet cases searching for desperate rough trade. Predominately white and frequently upscale professionals like lawyers, these tricks earned a reputation for being obnoxious and unpleasant. The hustlers who hung around at the Anco—trade that existed to finance their next blackout—were often killing time before starting their midnight-to-eight shifts at nearby all-male theaters. Latino junkies on the lam after a quick strongarm robbery slumped in the aisles, enjoying their nods relatively undisturbed. Professional black Deuce criminals—men who stole credit cards, pickpocketed wallets, and burned suburbanites with phony drug deals—also hid out, knowing no tourist would ever lead the cops in here."[41]

The Anco, formerly across the street from New York's Port Authority bus terminal, is the sleaziest establishment recounted by the authors of *Sleazoid Express*, an early-Tom-Waits-like ethnography of the culture of the grindhouses of Times Square (a.k.a. the Deuce), and one of the few works on grindhouse to concentrate as much on the theatrical experience itself as on the films. It should be noted that the line separating empirical, historical reality from mythology is unclear here. *Sleazoid Express*, like the Muller and Faris book *Grindhouse* mentioned earlier, is likely a somewhat exaggerated and romanticized account of the grindhouse experience, even a kind of tourism of the underclass.

That said, the book's depiction of the Anco and other Deuce theaters is a far cry from the limited set of activities chronicled by Acland, bringing to mind Michael Bérubé's neat definition, via Raymond Williams, of hegemony as "merely seek[ing] to set the bounds of the thinkable."[42] Such a scenario, embellished or not, is literally unthinkable in the current exhibition environment, for the reasons Acland notes—there is simply too much institutional emphasis on the theater as a space for watching films, whatever one's subsidiary conduct. Now, I'm not proposing the Anco as the best model for Acland's alternative public sphere—if in fact such a public sphere ever existed—and a more detailed history of grindhouse spectatorship would have to contend with the dearth of empirical evidence about these spectators and with the possible embellishment of the few anecdotal histories. My concern, which will soon bring us back to Tarantino and Rodriguez's *Grindhouse*, is with examining the grindhouse —or at the very least the mythology of it—as a space of class and racial heterogeneity.

Consider that the grindhouse audience is typically discussed in terms of gender. Eric Schaefer notes that with the introduction of sexploitation in the 1960s, followed by hardcore pornography, grindhouse audiences became almost exclusively male, a shift from the classical exploitation film's cross-gender appeal. The location of grindhouse theaters in skid-row neighborhoods further discouraged female attendance.[43]*Sleazoid Express* describes most of the Times Square theaters as unfit for unaccompanied females, especially the bathrooms and back hallways. (Concerns for women's safety were cited as one reason for the Times Square corporate redevelopment project in the 1990s.) The grindhouse as venue for unpoliced sexual activity is well-known, and the subset of hard-core grindhouse theaters has elicited scholarship on both straight and gay

porn spectatorship.[44]

However, what has not been as often discussed is the racial and cross-class diversity and interaction in the grindhouse, and the possible social benefits of such interaction. Samuel R. Delany's thoughtful book *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* is instructive here. The book comprises two long essays. First is an anecdotal recollection of Delany's decades as an habitué of Times Square theaters, especially its all-male venues, and his sexual and non-sexual encounters therein. The second part offers an extended analysis of valuable modes of personal interaction as expressed in Times Square and derailed by the destruction of the grindhouses and other businesses and the Disneyfication of the area.[45] While many of the theatrical encounters Delany describes are predicated on sex or the possibility of it, for him the sex is a pleasurable vehicle for something even more important, namely, the ability to interact with a wide range of individuals across races and classes:

> "The population was incredibly heterogeneous—white, black, Hispanic, Asian, Indian, Native American, and a variety of Pacific Islanders…. I've met playwrights, carpenters, opera singers, telephone repair men, stockbrockers, guys on welfare, guys with trust funds, guys on crutches, on walkers, in wheelchairs…."[46]

Tarantino grew up in Carson, California, a small suburb adjacent to Long Beach and Compton, where whites comprised only 24% of the population, according to the 2010 census. He tells a similar tale of audience diversity:

> "I lived in the urban area of the South Bay. In the city of Carson, a big black, Hispanic, and Samoan area, there was a theater called the Carson Twin Cinema…. There was this one double feature that they whipped out at least twice a year, and that was *Five Fingers of Death* [Chang-hwa Jeong, HK, 1972] and *Enter the Dragon* [Robert Clouse, HK/US, 1973]. And they knew, when they showed *Five Fingers of Death* and *Enter the Dragon*, that it was just going to be fuckin' pandemonium. People would always go see it. Black guys, the Crips, yelling at the screen, all the Samoans there, people getting into kung-fu fights and shit…it was a blast. It was so much fun. Video has taken that away, a little bit… the communal aspect of it, the ritualistic aspect of it."[47]

Judging by these two examples, it seems hardly the case, as Douglas Gomery once argued, that the grindhouses "were servicing only African-Americans."[48] One suspects they may have been more racially and class-diverse than those in suburban neighborhoods. For Delany, this interaction across class—and, given society's makeup, across race—that he calls simply "contact," is the essence of city life, and it is the only opportunity for its widespread sustainability and improvement. Delaney writes,

> "If our ideal is to promote movement among the classes and the opportunity for such movement, we can do it only if we create greater propinquity among the different elements that make up the different classes."[49]

The grindhouse, while hardly a utopian venue for such cross-class, cross-racial contact, offers a wider array of possibilities than a multiplex audience, however diverse, because of the lack of overwhelming

institutional focus on the film playing at the front of the room. Tarantino is wrong when he singles out video for taking that sense of community away; the film theater itself in its contemporary form is just as much to blame. Contrary to Acland's portrayal of the theater as a space of diverse activity and interaction, any possibility for a truly alternative public sphere is upset by its emphasis on turnover and discipline. *Grindhouse* must therefore find an alternate means, as it does through its digital image degradation, to convey filmgoing practices lost to a transformed theatrical economy.

The power of cheese

Tarantino earlier suggests the violence that will befall Julia (Sydney Tamiia Poitier) with of a shot of her feet and a poster of *Soldier Blue*. The controversial 1970 exploitation western gorily depicted a U.S. Cavalry massacre of a Native American village, and was released in the wake of the 1969 revelation of the My Lai massacre.

The second group of women in *Death Proof* resemble the first in their racial makeup. The film makes little of their racial diversity.

Multiracial girl power, as the trio chase down Stuntman Mike.

As spectatorial heterogeneity and interaction common to the grindhouse has been suppressed in modern exhibition practices, *Grindhouse* has supplied its own sort of heterogeneity via its cheesy aesthetic and content, both in the text of its double feature and the paratext of its trailers and additional footage. The disappearance of the especially cheesy paratext from the DVD release, however, signals that the film is ultimately still beholden to a Hollywood political economy that undermines such commentary. The recuperation of grindhouse in the video market, which followed the disappearance of the grindhouse exhibition circuit, and which ultimately fed the cinematic imaginations of Tarantino, Rodriguez, and *Grindhouse*, is indebted to the rise of cheese as a peculiarly late-20th-century phenomenon of taste.

Calling something "cheesy," whether approvingly or disparagingly, has become something like recognizing pornography in that while its contours and boundaries may be poorly defined, we know it when we see it. At times it appears to overlap with "campy" or "corny" in its appreciation of excess and datedness (though "corny" is more strictly about being out of fashion). Steven Cohan calls camp "that little something extra," while for Andrew Ross it is the "rediscovery of history's waste."[50] [open endnotes in new window]Additionally, both "campy" and "cheesy" are used to describe both production and reception practices. Esther Williams movies or *The Brady Bunch* (ABC, 1969-1974) can be watched as camp or cheese, and John Waters' work or the films of Troma Entertainment are self-consciously made as camp or cheese. But I think most would also agree that camp and cheese are not synonymous, that John Waters' films are campy but not cheesy, or that *The Brady Bunch* and *Shaft* (Gordon Parks, 1971) are cheesy but hardly campy. What is the difference, then, and why has "cheesy" overtaken "campy" as the favored descriptive term? Annalee Newitz's article "What Makes Things Cheesy? Satire, Multinationalism, and B-Movies" is to my knowledge the only effort to construct a theory of cheese and to account for its ascendancy as a marker of taste. Newitz doesn't explicitly address the question of precisely who uses the term and whether it is independent of race and class—she does suggest, for example, that blaxploitation is now consumed cheesily by black and non-black communities alike but offers no concrete evidence. (In my own experience, I have heard the term applied by students at both state and private universities, both prestigious and less so—though these classes have all been predominantly composed of white students.)

Building on the scholarship on camp, from Susan Sontag to Pamela Robertson Wojcik to Andrew Ross, Newitz makes a similar argument about cheese, namely that it critiques social conventions through mockery and derision, "relegat[ing] their power to the ash can of history."[51] However, whereas Sontag describes camp as primarily a Euro-American phenomenon whose subject is gender norms, Newitz sees cheese's critique of normativity turning instead to issues of race, ethnicity, and nationalism.

Many critics remarked on the "empowered" women of *Death Proof*, but few discussed their racial diversity and its implications.

In *Werewolf Women of the SS*, director Rob Zombie indulges in both Nazi exploitation camp, with Warhol favorite Udo Kier and friends …

… as well as a more "cheesy" sensibility, as in Nicolas Cage's Fu Manchu cameo.

A "local" advertisement for Acuña Boys restaurant delivers more cheese between features.

As global trade patterns of the late-20th and 21st-century United States have shifted from Europe to the Pacific Rim, the cultural exports of Japan, China, and Mexico have enabled such "cheesy cultural hybrids" as the *telenovela*-tweaking *Ugly Betty* (ABC, 2006-2010), Hello Kitty, the Hollywood career of Jackie Chan, poorly-dubbed Hong Kong action films, and the tentpole remakes of *Godzilla* (Roland Emmerich, 1998) and *Speed Racer* (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 2008), to name just a few examples. Through their failed "attempt to unite, through satiric spectacle, all the cultures and nations on the planet," these cheesy texts parody or deflect the troubling histories of imperialism and racism between the United States and these countries.[52] (In turn, the Pacific Rim's cheesy consumption of Elvis, James Dean and Disney become a sardonic means of defusing its own legacies of imperialism and colonialism.[53])

Similarly, to revel in the cheesy pleasures of 1970s blaxploitation, the "wah-wah" bass line in the Axe body spray ads that trades on blaxploitation, the parodic whiteness of *The Brady Bunch* (original series or big-screen adaptation), the *faux*-jazz or "Latin" stylings of Henry Mancini or Lawrence Welk, etc., the spectator's awareness of cheesiness defers historical, and ongoing, racial divisions and tensions. The ubiquity of cheese in our current culture, then, results from the constant, unresolved presence of cultural concerns over race, ethnicity, and national identity.

Given this, it should not be at all surprising that Tarantino and Rodriguez play significant roles in Newitz's analysis of cheese. Newitz goes so far as to christen Tarantino "the auteur of cheese," and draws several examples from both his and Rodriguez's work. Tarantino's stylistic intertextuality regularly intersects with racial and national discourses:

- the nods toward blaxploitation in *Pulp Fiction* (epitomized by Tarantino's own monologue about bringing "dead niggers" into friends' homes);
- the Sonny Chiba triple feature Christian Slater's character watches in *True Romance* (Tony Scott, 1993, scripted by Tarantino);
- the too-numerous-to-count kung-fu movie homages in *Kill Bill Vol. 1*.

Rodriguez's debut film *El Mariachi* (MX/US, 1992) was filmed in Mexico and in Spanish, and his subsequent films have often literally and figuratively straddled U.S./Mexico cultural borders. *From Dusk Till Dawn* (1996), directed by Rodriguez and written by Tarantino, tells the story of two criminals escaping across the border, only to land in a Mexican saloon inhabited by vampires; Newitz points out the film's indebtedness to Mexican horror cinema and its similarity to the work of "Brazilian gore auteur" José Majica Marins in particular.[54] The DVD extras for *Once Upon a Time In Mexico* (2003) even contain a short film of Rodriguez demonstrating to the viewer how to cook Puerco Pibil, a favorite dish of Johnny Depp's character in the film. In short, the prospect of a Tarantino-Rodriguez double feature promises a veritable smorgasbord of cheese.

The racial discourse of *Grindhouse* does continue the cheesy tradition of both directors but with some important differences. Many observers have written about both features' central female characters, the beautiful, "empowered" women who take revenge on their male oppressors. For example, Rose McGowan's hysterically phallic machine-gun prosthetic leg in *Planet Terror* seems to parody this exploitation trope—in a campy rather than cheesy vein—while the representation of the three women taking down Kurt Russell in *Death Proof* (and led by real-life Kiwi

Uninviting lighting and Muzak accompaniment raise questions of cultural authenticity central to the consumption of cheese.

Set in Plymouth, Massachusetts, *Thanksgiving* promises cheesy horror on a most American holiday, one with the dispelling of racial and cultural tensions central to its mythos.

Rodriguez's contributions to *Grindhouse* are especially cheesy. *Machete* idolizes Mexican-American actor Danny Trejo, whose memorably rugged face seems to damage the film itself.

Planet Terror concludes with Cherry and her tribe fleeing Texas (suggested by a shot of burned-out skyscrapers) …

stuntwoman Zoë Bell) suggests a more critical, even proto-feminist take. [55] Less discussed have been the films' many re-articulations, and at times inversions, of racial conventions through the power of cheese. *Death Proof* is constructed in two parallel halves, each depicting the adventures of a trio of women composed of a Caucasian, an African-American, and a Latina (the first half ends tragically, the second in ass-kicking jubilation). Notably, though, little is made of these racial differences, either by the characters themselves or others. In one early scene, the first trio of women yell out each time they drive past a billboard advertising "Jungle Julia," the radio show Julia (Sydney Poitier) hosts. Julia's moniker, accompanied by an image of her lithe, prone body sprawled out on a bear rug, evokes a history of racist, sexualized depictions of black women, and yet the women in the car regard it with winking pride. Tarantino playfully nudges the portrayal of black women, especially in the blaxploitation films he loves, through the cheesy image, and the cheesy pleasure the characters (and by extension the audience) take in the portrait that sublimates racial inequities.

Rodriguez's half of *Grindhouse* is even more pointed in its reworking of racial tropes. Besides Rose McGowan's Cherry, the other star of *Planet Terror* is *Six Feet Under*'s (HBO, 2001-2005) Freddy Rodriguez as ex-military Latino action hero El Wray, who is leading a band of chemical plague survivors from Texas to safety in Mexico, and sacrifices himself in the effort. In the film's final scene, with the United States assumed to be decimated by the plague, Cherry and the other survivors are living happily in an ancient Mexican seaside ruin that is clearly designed to evoke Olmec or Mayan architecture. The conclusion casually suggests the rebuilding of long-dead or -vanquished cultures, beyond colonizing influences. To cite another example, an early scene involves a generically Middle Eastern mercenary biochemical engineer (played by *Lost*'s [ABC, 2004-2010] Naveen Andrew) collecting the testicles of an underling. But this stereotypical portrayal of villainous, emasculating Arabs is complicated when he joins up with El Wray and Cherry against the *real* villains of the piece, the U.S. military. We later learn in a convoluted tale that a rogue lieutenant (Bruce Willis) killed Osama bin Laden unexpectedly in Afghanistan, and it's implied that the upper echelons wanted him to die a less mundane death, or perhaps not die at all. For his sins, the lieutenant is exposed to the deadly toxin created by Andrew's scientist. Thus the cheesy Arab villain motif, with its imperial undercurrent, is turned into a swipe at the forces in charge of the current Middle East occupation.

But the cheesiness of *Grindhouse* is shot through more than just the two features on its double bill. Because of their compactness, the *faux* trailers and other footage that flank the features are even more pronounced in their cheesy sensibility. Nicolas Cage makes a cameo appearance as Fu Manchu, complete with Orientalized musical accompaniment; in the preview for *Werewolf Women of the S.S.* Eli Roth's *Thanksgiving* uses the Capraesque atmosphere of small-town, white-bread, parades-on-Main-Street Americana as ironic counterpoint for a demented serial-killer tale. An advertisement crops up in between the double feature for the Acuña Boys restaurant (also the name of a Mexican gang in *Kill Bill Vol. 2*), promising "Authentic Tex-Mex Food" on its logo. Accompanied by easy-listening instrumental music and unappetizing photos of menu items, the ad subtly provokes anxieties over cultural hybridity and fidelity that are at the heart of cheesy consumption.

… and set up their new lives in an ancient Mexican ruin, perhaps on the Gulf of Mexico.

Here the world can begin again, as a pre-colonial culture is given a second chance.

Sandwiched between the double bill, *Grindhouse* takes a moment to offer the closest thing to a lesson in the film. Perhaps not surprisingly, this bit did not survive the initial transition to DVD. Viewing it at home on the newer Blu-ray theatrical version, it remains somewhat out of place.

The most sustained expression of cheese in *Grindhouse*, though, is Rodriguez's trailer for *Machete*. It concerns the eponymous adventures of a rogue Mexican federal agent (played by Mexican-American cult actor Danny Trejo) who is hired by a powerful man to kill a sitting U.S. Senator. "As you may know," the man tells him, "illegal aliens such as yourself are being forced out of our country at an alarming rate." The Senator (whose crimes against the undocumented are left to the imagination) must die, "for the good of both our people." Naturally, Machete is double-crossed and nearly killed, after which he vows revenge and enlists the help of his brother, a shotgun-packing Catholic priest played by Cheech Marin. The trailer builds to its climactic line: "They just fucked with the wrong Mexican!" Making little clear narrative sense, but taking potshots at the undocumented immigrant debate, the hypocrisy of America's wealthy and its politicians toward the foreign other, and even the Catholic Church, *Machete* becomes, to use Newitz's words,

> "simply a way of laughing at something that seems utterly horrifying in its complexity: the totality of social connections and disconnections we call multinationalism."[56]

The high cheese of those trailers and other inserts suggests that *Grindhouse* was (the past tense is appropriate here) attempting to be cheesy not only on the textual level but also on an exhibition level—promoting an alternative model of cross-racial contact and contemplation through those elements usually only seen in the theater. Except for the *Machete* trailer, which introduces the *Planet Terror* DVD, this flotsam that surrounds and contextualizes the two features is not to be found on the individual DVD releases. The fact that the cheesiness of *Grindhouse* occurs not only in the texts of the features themselves but also in the paratext is an important distinction. In the decision to release *Planet Terror* and *Death Proof* separately, an industrial decision has clearly been made to regard the attendant trailers and add-ons as something less than text, less than central to the home viewing experience. And why not, since the promotion and criticism surrounding the film constructed *Grindhouse* as a theatrical experience? "I'm sad that most people will see *Grindhouse* on video," critic David Edelstein laments, meaning of course that the home viewer will not truly see the film in the same way as the moviegoer, even once the paratext has been restored to the inevitable "directors' cut" release. (The anticipation surrounding such a release, evident on DVD aficionado websites, restores the film to the temporal logic of DVD release patterns, where DVDs are reissued in "improved" form to maximize profits.) Arguments such as Edelstein's are familiar, but they resonate even more with *Grindhouse*. The cheese melts once the disc hits your DVD player. *Grindhouse*'s desire to extend some fragment of "the totality of social connections and disconnections" into the theater is radically inconsistent with the highly disciplined, temporally managed, late capitalist exhibition system in which this Hollywood film was consumed.

In her examination of "the disappearing image," Laura Marks argues that to engage with these images

> "invites a kind of compassion and open-ended love that can also be a way to engage with people and with death."[57]

The box-office failure of *Grindhouse*, and its subsequent years-long disappearance from the landscape in anything resembling its original form,

invites a kind of compassion of its own, regardless of one's feelings about the filmmakers involved.[58] Though undeniably a product of late capitalist Hollywood, *Grindhouse* was also an ambivalent experiment in cinema exhibition, an attempt to simulate a theatrical experience outside of the strict temporal regimes and behavioral guidelines of the modern multiplex. Its failure illuminates the chasm separating its simulated image dissolution with the grindhouse's real thing, received (or ignored) by an audience whose makeup and interaction is both precipitated and sanctioned by that disappearance. Such a model of spectatorship, which at its best fostered a kind of contemplation, however troubled, beyond one's social enclave, can also be seen reflected in *Grindhouse*'s cheesy text and paratext. But the kind of contact (to use Delany's term) that is variously parodied, questioned and embraced in the film, has only a pale analogue in the theaters in which it played.

Go to notes page

To top   Print version   JC 54   *Jump Cut* home

Notes

 1. David Edelstein, "Blood and Guts. No Urine," *New York*, 16 April 2007, <http://nymag.com/movies/reviews/30321/> (2 April 2009).
[return to page 1 of essay]

2. Jack Stevenson, *Land of a Thousand Balconies: Discoveries and Confessions of a B-Movie Archaeologist* (London: Headpress, 2003), 76.

3. Brandon Gray, "*Grindhouse* Dilapidated Over Easter Weekend." 9 April 2007, <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/news/?id=2289&p=s.htm> (2 April 2009);
"The *Grindhouse* Second-Guessing Scorecard," 9 April 2007 <http://www.thereeler.com/the_blog/the_grindhouse _secondguessing.php> (2 April 2009);
"The Morning After: Length, Timing Gutted *Grindhouse* B.O.," *Daily Variety*, 10 April 2007, 1. For sections of the international audience even less familiar with the exploitation double feature, The Weinstein Company announced they would be distributing the two features separately—a strategy demonstrating the malleability of the film's high concept under a global Hollywood regime ("Not the Same Old *Grind*," *Daily Variety*, 19 February 2007, 5).

4. Caetlin Benson-Allott, "*Grindhouse*: An Experiment in the Death of Cinema," *Film Quarterly* 62:1 (Fall 2008): 20.

5. Annalee Newitz, "What Makes Things Cheesy? Satire, Multinationalism, and B-Movies," *Social Text* 63 (Summer 2000): 59-82.

6. Eric Schaefer, *"Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!" A History of Exploitation Films, 1919-1959* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999)

7. Douglas Gomery, *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992).

8. Ina Rae Hark, ed., *Exhibition, the Film Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Gregory A. Waller, *Moviegoing in America: A Sourcebook in the History of Film Exhibition* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002).

9. Bill Landis and Michelle Clifford, *Sleazoid Express: A Mind-Twisting Tour Through the Grindhouse Cinema of Times Square* (New York: Fireside, 2002); Eddie Muller and Daniel Faris, *Grindhouse: The Forbidden World of "Adults Only" Cinema* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996); Stevenson, *Land of a Thousand Balconies: Discoveries and Confessions of a B-Movie*

Archaeologist.

10. Eddie Muller and Daniel Faris, *Grindhouse: The Forbidden World of "Adults Only" Cinema*, 8.

11. Larry Carroll, "Tarantino and Rodriguez Eager to Exploit More Exploitation Flicks," 27 March 2007, < http://www.mtv.com/movies/news/articles/1555723/story.jhtml> (2 April 2009).

12. Jeffrey Sconce, "'Trashing' the Academy: Taste, Excess, and an Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style," *Screen* 36:4 (Winter 1995): 371-393.

13. <http://www.42ndstreetpete.com> (24 April 2010).

14. Emmanuel Itier, "*Planet Terror/Death Proof*: A Modern Day Double Feature from the Masters of the Grindhouse," 29 March 2007 <http://www.buzzinefilm.com/interviews/film-interview-quentin-tarantino-robert-rodriguez-grindhouse-04032007> (10 September 2012).

15. Gerald Peary, ed., *Quentin Tarantino: Interviews* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), vii.

16. Chuck Stephens, "The Whole She-Bang: The Incredible Two-Headed Tarantino and the Last of His Double Bills," *Film Comment* 40 (July-August 2004): 44.

17. Cindy Pearlman, "Blood & Guts: Quentin Tarantino and Robert Rodriguez Dare to Bring Bloody Back with *Grindhouse*, Their Late-Night Double Feature Gorefest," *Chicago Sun-Times* 1 April 2007, D1.

18. Chris Willman, "Celluloid Heroes," in *Quentin Tarantino: Interviews*, ed. Peary, 139-140.

19. Alain Bielik, "*Grindhouse*: Pistol-Packing VFX," 6 April 2007, <http://www.vfxworld.com/?sa=adv&code=319b255d&atype=articles&id=3235&page=1> (30 March 2009); Martin McEachern, "*Grindhouse*," *Computer Graphics World* 30 (April 2007), <http://www.cgw.com/Publications/CGW/2007/Volume-30-Issue-4-April-2007-/Grindhouse.aspx> (10 September 2012) [return to page 2]

20. Though Rodriguez, Wright, Roth all discussed in interviews the possibility of expanding these trailers into actual films, the financial failure of *Grindhouse* has made this less likely. Only *Machete* (2010) has made it to the theater, starring Danny Trejo, Lindsay Lohan, Robert DeNiro, and Cheech Marin. *Hobo with a Shotgun*, originally the winner of a *Grindhouse* trailer competition at 2007's South by Southwest festival in Austin, was shot in Halifax and released in 2011 with Rutger Hauer as the titular hobo.

21. Caetlin Benson-Allott, "*Grindhouse*," 21.

22. Paul Grainge, *Monochrome Memories: Nostalgia and Style in Retro America* (Westport: Praeger, 2002), 19-40.

23. Grainge, *Monochrome Memories*, 29.

24. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 19-20, 279-296.

25. Simon During, "Postmodernism or Post-colonialism Today," *Textual Practice* 1:1 (1987): 32-47; Linda Hutcheon, "Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern," 1998 <http://www.library.utoronto.ca/utel/criticism/hutchinp.html - N69> (2 April 2009).

26. Given the film's exploitation origins, it may not be surprising that both missing reels happen during scenes promising erotic activity—a love scene in *Planet Terror*, a lap dance in *Death Proof*—which, of course, never arrive (though the lap dance does resurface in *Death Proof*'s stand-alone "extended" DVD release).

27. Laura U. Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 93-94.

28. Lucas Hilderbrand, "Grainy Days and Mondays: *Superstar* and Bootleg Aesthetics," *Camera Obscura* 57 (2004): 71.

29. Hilderbrand, "Grainy Days and Mondays," 71.

30. Grant McCracken, *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991) 13; see also Erving Goffman, "Symbols of Class Status," *British Journal of Sociology* 2 (December 1951): 294-304.

31. Grainge, 3.

32. In fact, in 2010 yet *another* version of *Planet Terror* was released on Blu-ray, dropping the *Machete* trailer and removing nearly all the digital scratches and other damage done to the film. The Blu-ray of *Death Proof*, which had from its theatrical release shown less aggressive print degeneration, remained in this respect "intact."

33. Charles R. Acland, *Screen Traffic: Movies, Multiplexes, and Global Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 62-67.

34. Acland, *Screen Traffic*, 65.

35. Janet Staiger, *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 2.

36. Staiger, *Perverse Spectators*, 55.

37. Acland, 68.

38. At the theaters of the now-defunct Kerasotes chain in the Midwest, I have often laughed at the Panopticon-like warning preceding the show: "We are always nearby."

39. Acland, 57-58.

40. Acland, 243.

41. Landis and Clifford, *Sleazoid Express: A Mind-Twisting Tour Through the Grindhouse Cinema of Times Square*, 79.

42. Michael Bérubé, "Theory Tuesday V (part two)," 6 September 2006, <http://www.michaelberube.com/index.php/weblog/comments/theory_tuesday_v_part_two/> (5 January 2009).

43. Schaefer, *"Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!" A History of Exploitation Films, 1919-1959*, 123-124.

44. José B. Capino, "Homologies of Space: Text and Spectatorship in All-Male Adult Theaters," *Cinema Journal* 45 (Fall 2005): 50-65; John Champagne, "Stop Reading Films! Film Studies, Close Analysis, and Gay Pornography," *Cinema Journal* 36 (Summer 1997): 76-97; Scott MacDonald, "Confessions of a Feminist Porn Watcher," in *Film Quarterly: Forty Years—A Selection*, eds. Brian Henderson and Anne Martin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

45. Samuel R. Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (New York: New York University Press, 1999). For an account of the Times Square redevelopment project and its ramifications, see Benjamin Chesluk, *Money Jungle: Imagining the New Times Square* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007).

46. Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*, 15.

47. Don Gibalevich, "Out of the Past: Quentin Tarantino—On Ambition, Exploitation, and Playing Psycho," in Peary, 177.

48. Gomery, *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States*, 169. Jane Gaines has written intriguingly on the possibility of a long history of white spectators attending "race movies" at segregated theaters, as well as the historiographic dilemmas involved in such a project. Gaines, "The White in the Race Movie Audience," in *Going to the Movies: Hollywood and the Social Experience of Cinema*, eds. Richard Maltby, Melvyn Stokes, and Robert C. Allen (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007).

49. Delany, 179.

50. Steven Cohan, *Incongruous Entertainment: Camp, Cultural Value, and the MGM Musical* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005); Andrew Ross, *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1989).
[return to page 3]

51. Annalee Newitz, "What Makes Things Cheesy? Satire, Multinationalism, and B-Movies," 59.

52. Newitz, "What Makes Things Cheesy?" 61.

53. Newitz, 60.

54. Newitz, n31.

55. For some considerations of *Grindhouse* and feminism, from multiple perspectives, see Richard Corliss, "Why Can't a Woman… Be a Man?" *Time*, 5 April 2007,
<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1607257,00.html> (2 April 2009);
Dana Stevens, "Bloody Good," *Slate*, 5 April 2007,
<http://www.slate.com/id/2163590/> (30 March 2009).

56. Newitz, 61.

57. Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*, 109.

58. Is there is a better film example to argue for the potential research value of downloading in-theater recordings of films off the Internet? As I was unable to afford (or stomach) buying the Japanese 6-disc theatrical release, my Bittorrent file was until fairly recently the only access I had to the theatrical version.

Sgt. Jeffrey Sarver in real life "'rendered safe the largest number of IEDs [improvised explosive devices] that were disarmed by any one team since operations began in Iraq.'…. [He] is officially a hero. Nestled in the pocket of his shirt is a Bronze Star." (*Playboy* article, 152)

In the movie *The Hurt Locker* (2010), Sgt. William James (Jeremy Renner) and his team disarm more IEDs than any other team in Iraq.

The Hurt Locker litigation: an adult's story

by Robert Alpert

Opening remarks

During the summer of 2009 I saw *The Hurt Locker* and by early 2010 had written an essay for *Jump Cut* entitled "Kathryn Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker*: a jack-in-the-box story."[1] [open endnotes in new window] The essay summarizes the dilemma of its central character, Sgt. William James, by focusing on the movie's penultimate scene:

> "There is no more poignant scene than that of James with his baby son and the jack-in-the-box so cherished by his son. When we grow up, we love so much, including mommy, daddy, pajamas and the jack-in-the-box, he tells his uncomprehending son, but as we age they no longer seem so special. We come to love less and less, realizing that even the jack-in-the-box is made of pieces of tin — or plastic, like the Radio Shack pieces which James keeps beneath his bed. Thus, James comes to embrace death….He rejects the comforts of his social world, the soothing music of the supermarket, a world which insists that death is nowhere to be found and that we are the master of all that we survey, in short, a world that lacks the imagination to see what is beyond our own gaze. In that rejection, though, he finds himself alone and marching inexorably to his own death, a bleak ending for Bigelow's stated hero."

This follow up essay traces the real life consequences of Bigelow's movie to a "stated hero." As the Oscar awards night in March 2010 drew closer, an army sergeant named Jeffrey Sarver sued Bigelow, her screenwriter Mark Boal, and the producers of *The Hurt Locker*. The film had been nominated for several Oscar awards, and Sarver claimed to be the source for the William James character. My immediate reaction was that his claim had no basis, that he was looking to take advantage of the film's unexpected success, and that the right to free speech under the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution would result in the dismissal of his claim.

Having reviewed the documents filed in connection with that lawsuit, which, as of this writing in mid- September 2012, is still pending on an appeal from the trial court's decision, I now read the irony of my first
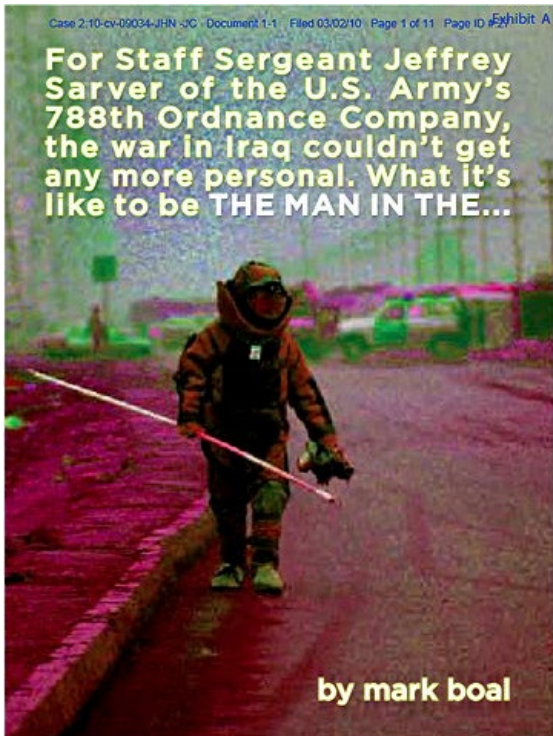
essay's summary of the film's theme:

> "In depicting the daily activities of a U.S. bomb squad in Iraq, Kathryn Bigelow continues to explore the rules of engagement of her culture and the resulting emotional schizophrenia and deathly effect on those who would challenge those rules."

Real life in this instance did have its "deathly effect on [one] who would challenge those rules." Those "rules" in this case consisted of the apparent legal right to commercialize aspects of Sarver's persona and life without his consent in the public interest of publicizing those aspects in the context of a drama depicting the US war in Iraq.

Background to the dispute

On February 2, 2010, the Oscar nominations for the films of 2009 were announced. *The Hurt Locker*, which had been directed by Kathryn Bigelow and written by Mark Boal, was among the ten films nominated for Best Picture. *Avatar*, directed and written by James Cameron, Bigelow's former husband, was also on that list. Bigelow and Cameron were also both nominated for best directors. As Oscar night, March 7, 2010, approached, there was clearly a focus on the competition between these two films. Only five days before that night, on March 2, however, Sergeant Jeffrey Sarver, a nearly 20-year career soldier in the U.S. Army [2], sued in New Jersey federal court Bigelow, Boal, Summit Entertainment and others connected with the movie. In his complaint, in which he demanded a jury trial, Sarver alleged numerous claims as a result of the release of *The Hurt Locker*, including claims for "misappropriation" of his name and likeness, "false light invasion of privacy", defamation, breach of contract and fraud. Given the timing of the lawsuit's filing, there was obviously press coverage.

While financially far less successful than *Avatar* [3], Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker* triumphed on Oscar night over Cameron's *Avatar*, and was awarded Oscars for Best Picture, Directing and Writing (Original Screenplay). In accepting her award for best director, Bigelow acknowledged her debt both to screenwriter Boal and to the military whose story Boal's screenplay had described: [4]

> "I would not be standing here if it wasn't for Mark Boal, who risked his life for the words on the page and wrote such a courageous screenplay.....And I'd just like to dedicate this to the women and men in the military who risk their lives on a daily basis in Iraq and Afghanistan and around the world. And may they come home safe."

In accepting his award for best original screenplay, Boal echoed that debt to the military:

> "I would also like to thank and dedicate this to the troops: The hundred and fifteen thousand who are still in Iraq, the
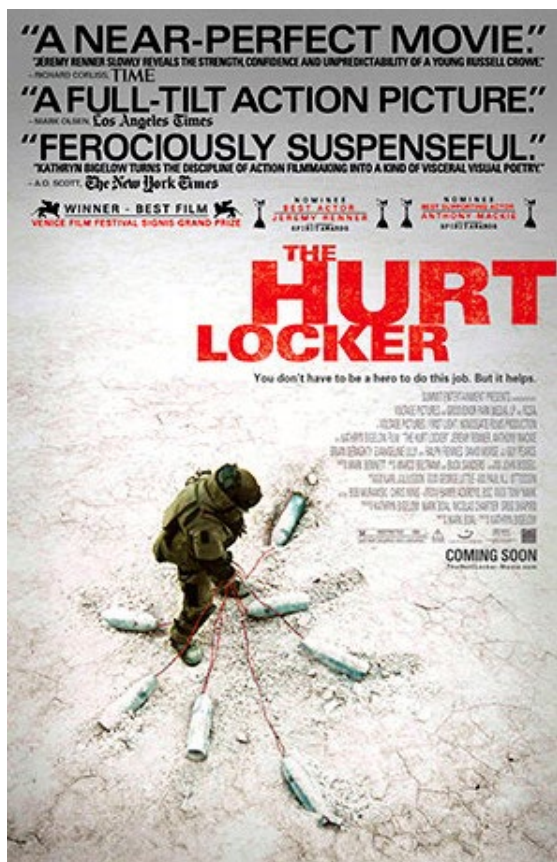
hundred and twenty thousand in Afghanistan, and the more than thirty thousand wounded and four thousand who have not made it home."

And in accepting with others the Oscar award for Best Picture, Bigelow underscored that sentiment:

> "And perhaps one more dedication: To men and women all over the world who, sorry to reiterate, but wear a uniform. But even not just the military – hazmat, emergency, firemen. You know, they're there for us and we're there for them....."

Sergeant Sarver's lawsuit was soon forgotten. Only late in 2011 did news of the lawsuit resurface when a California federal court found that Sarver's claims were deficient as a matter of law and dismissed the entire case. [5] Sarver's essential claim had been that he, Sarver, is William James, that *The Hurt Locker* is his story, and that neither Boal nor Bigelow was entitled to portray his story without his consent, let alone in a manner which allegedly placed him in a "false light". In dismissing the lawsuit, the court awarded to the defendants their attorney's fees so that Sarver must pay their expenses in defending against the lawsuit. While Sarver has appealed the trial court's dismissal, it is hard not to view in hindsight the dismissal of his case as inevitable given an arguable misstep on his part and the consequences of a contrary decision to the Hollywood film industry. It is also hard not to view the lawsuit as an ironic vindication of Bigelow's disillusionment with adulthood, which her stated hero, William James, conveyed to his uncomprehending son in the telling of the jack-in-the box story.

Sarver's connection to *The Hurt Locker* began in 2004. Wishing to avoid adverse or misinformed press coverage and presumably hoping to facilitate favorable coverage, the U.S. Department of Defense had announced a policy whereby reporters would be attached to – or "embedded" with - military units. The Department of Defense allegedly [6] wrote as follows about the purpose of "embedding media":

> "Media coverage of any future operation will, to a large extent, shape public perception of the national security environment now and in the years ahead...Our ultimate strategic success in bringing peace and security to this region will come in our long-term commitment to supporting our democratic ideals. We need to tell the factual story – good or bad – before others seed the media with disinformation and distortions...Our people in the field need to tell our story...To accomplish this we will embed media with our units. These embedded media will live, work and travel as part of the units with which they are embedded to facilitate maximum, in-depth coverage of U.S. forces in combat and related operations...."

… and James Cameron's *Avatar* are the leading contenders. The announcement is Hollywood drama, pitting ex-spouses against one another as well as independent filmmaker against a highly successful, commercial director.

Five days before Oscar night Sarver files a lawsuit in New Jersey in which he names those connected with the movie *The Hurt Locker*, including Bigelow and Boal, director and

Mark Boal, an experienced freelance journalist of many years for such publications as the *Village Voice* and *Rolling Stone*, was "embedded" in 2004 as a journalist for *Playboy* with U.S. military troops stationed in Iraq. Boal was embedded, in particular, for a period of time with Sarver's explosive ordinance disposal ("EOD") unit, which undertook the daily task of disarming improvised explosive devices ("IEDs"). Sarver headed this particular EOD unit and, in accordance with the Department of Defense's policy, cooperated with Boal so that Boal could experience firsthand "the factual story" of the military "in the field." As Sarver has acknowledged, Boal later also interviewed Sarver in Wisconsin after Sarver had returned to the United States from his then tour of duty. [7]

Boal wrote and *Playboy* published in its August/September 2005 issue an article about Boal's experiences in Iraq, and the article focused on Sarver. [8] The "title" alone makes this clear:

> "For Staff Sergeant Jeffrey Sarver of the U.S. Army's 788th Ordinance Company, the war in Iraq couldn't get any more personal. What it's like to be THE MAN IN THE BOMB SUIT."

The article details Sarver's personal life story. Thus, the article describes Sarver's formative childhood: [9]

> "When Sarver was six years old his dad, a carpenter, took him hunting for the first time. They left the trailer park near Huntington, West Virginia and went into the forest. Dad showed him how to be alone, how to be self-sufficient. If you were willing to bear the isolation of waiting for hours in a thicket, you could catch an animal in its natural grace, a flash of fur, muscle and hoof. His mother never

understood him, Sarver says. She always wanted to take him shopping, to visit relatives and socialize. 'Sorry, Mom,' he'd say, 'I just don't have the gay gene.'"

Boal consistently portrays Sarver as a loner, though one who wished to use his brains, not just his brawn. He quit the Rangers, an elite military unit, because he "never got over the feeling that he was just another glorified grunt....mindless groupthink." He then "volunteered for EOD, where brains mattered more than biceps..." [10] His childhood immersion in a gun culture remained with him as an adult. Thus, Boal describes Sarver's home in Wisconsin as filled with "rifles, shotguns and handguns" and the walls of that home covered with "animal mounts – a pheasant, a fox, a beaver and a deer head." Boal goes on to describe how Sarver "goes off on a hunting trip, a spree that leads to his killing dozens of animals and storing enough meat to make him self-sufficient for a year." [11]

As portrayed in the article, Sarver evokes the William James character in *The Hurt Locker*. Numerous details from the movie appear in the article. Like James in *The Hurt Locker*, Sarver

- is stationed at Camp Victory; [12]
- exhibits a sense of caring for a less competent team member; [13]
- inspects a bomb crater at night in order to determine whether it is the result of a remotely detonated bomb, illuminating with his flashlight on the periphery of the explosion tree branches which are intact (with the same "orange, perfect and ripe" [14] as appears in the movie);
- is enthusiastically praised by a colonel for disarming an IED ("Are you the crazy man in the bomb suit...Look at that hero. American's finest. That is some good shit...I want a picture with this man."); [15]
- is the leader of the EOD unit which disarmed in Iraq the greatest number of IEDs; [16] and
- returns home at the end of the last 30 days of his tour to the boredom of daily living in the United States – "He sits on the couch, checks out his mounts, orders pizza and watches TV." [17]

Other details in the article are also reminiscent of *The Hurt Locker*. Sarver "keeps recovered bomb parts in a box by his bed...[and] pictures of his son and his new girlfriend in his desk, under bits and pieces of IEDs." [18] Boal also portrays how Sarver, like James, is emotionally distanced from his son. [19] Most striking, however, is Boal's portrayal of Sarver as a soldier for whom "war is a drug".

- "At 10 feet out, the point of no return, he [Sarver] encounters what he calls the Morbid Thrill. He feels a methlike surge of adrenaline."
- "When he removes his helmet he stands sweating, pale, his body shaking from the rush."
- "Then he would go down on the bomb alone and feel the Morbid Thrill. Then he'd come back uprange, glowing from the rush..." [20]

Boal quotes Sarver expressing what is implicit in the James character. "Believe it or not...I'm clearly really going to miss this shithole." [21]

"Sarver keeps recovered bomb parts in a box by his bed." (*Playboy* article, 151)

"When Sarver is finished, the colonel…comes up to congratulate him….'Are you the crazy man in the bomb suit?' the colonel asks. 'Yes, sir, that was me.' 'Look at that hero. America's finest. That is some good shit…'" (*Playboy* article, 151)

"After coming back to the base…he would sort the bits of wiring he'd picked up on Baghdad's streets…In these devices Sarver could read the history of the insurgency as it grew in ferocity and sophistication." (*Playboy* article, 150)

Thus, Sarver, like James, eventually also returned to the war zone, signing his declaration in support of his lawsuit against Boal, Bigelow and others in Afghanistan.

In response to his receipt from Boal of an advance copy of the *Playboy* article, Sarver expressed to Boal his unhappiness with the article in light of, among other reasons, its focus on Sarver, not EOD units generally. [22] As Boal himself remarked at the time, Sarver's "initial reaction was less favorable" in comparison to Sarver's "senior enlisted commander…in Sarver's unit". [23] Sarver claims, however, that he was told that the article had already been published by this time, [24] and supposedly the military's legal department informed him that there was nothing that he could do "to stop the article". [25] Sarver has also claimed that Boal at the same time told him that Boal "intended to make the Playboy article into a movie." [26] Given Sarver's background and his continued service in and longstanding commitment to the military, it is not difficult to conceive that he would do nothing. It is also not difficult to conceive how Boal's conduct – his apparent expression of feeling safe only with Sarver, [27] his continual questioning of Sarver about his personal history – played to Sarver's ego and loner mentality. Assuming that Sarver has accurately portrayed how events transpired, Sarver naively exposed himself to Boal apparently without considering that Boal might focus his article on Sarver and then did nothing to prevent the article's publication, try to foreclose the possibility of the article becoming a movie or bar the movie's release.

Bigelow supposedly began working on the screenplay with Boal in 2005, with production on *The Hurt Locker* beginning in 2007. [28] A BFA graduate of the San Francisco Art Institute, a recipient of an independent study scholarship from NYC's Whitney Museum and an MFA graduate in film studies at Columbia University, Bigelow set out to make her eighth movie since 1982 on a relatively low budget through international financing. [29] After its festival showings at the Venice and Toronto film festivals and a public release in Italy in 2008, the movie was given on June 26, 2009, a limited, theatrical release in the United States, initially only in New York and Los Angeles. It received nearly universal, critically favorable reviews. Sarver, then stationed in New Jersey, somehow learned of the movie's limited release in the US, [30] and he attended with others from the military an early New York screening. Boal later testified that Sarver "as well as his military friends, indicated to me, following the premiere of the Film, that they thoroughly enjoyed the Film and appreciated how the military was portrayed in the Film." [31] In sharp contrast, one of those attending with Sarver later described the following exchange:
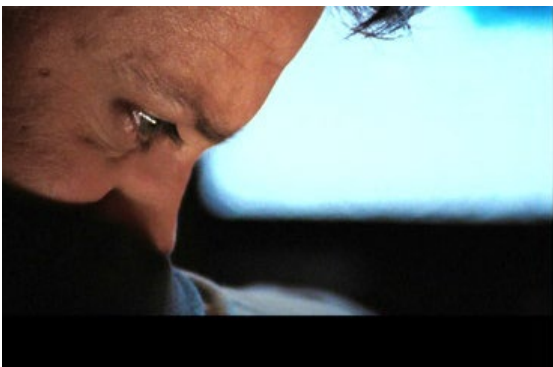
> "After the movie, Mr. Boal and Ms. Bigelow sat themselves right in front of our group, and started to answer questions

from the audience….Mr. Boal explained that the movie was based upon his experiences with a single EOD team… Mr. Boal and Ms. Bigelow were very relaxed while openly talking about the movie with the audience. During the question and answer session, our Garrison Commander asked Mr. Bigelow [*sic*] if he recognized the soldier seated (who was Sgt. Sarver) next to the Commander. In response, Mr. Boal answered that he recognized the soldier as Sgt. Sarver. Once Mr. Boal and Ms. Bigelow realized that Sgt. Sarver was in the audience, their carefree demeanor quickly changed as their answers became short and guarded, and they were in a hurry to leave the theatre." [32]

A wider theatrical release of the movie followed on July 24, 2009, including at a theatre near where Sarver was then stationed in New Jersey. The DVD for the movie was released on January 12, 2010.

The lawsuit: allegations and counter-allegations

Sarver filed his lawsuit in New Jersey federal court on March 2, 2010, and the complaint named as defendants The Hurt Locker, LLC, Mark Boal, Kathryn Bigelow, Summit Entertainment, Playboy Enterprises, Inc., and others. The complaint alleges seven claims: (1) right of publicity, (2) false light, (3) defamation (4) breach of contract, (5) intentional infliction of emotional distress, (6) actual/intentional fraud, and (7) constructive fraud/negligent misrepresentation. By way of background to these seven claims Sarver alleged:

"… 'The Hurt Locker' motion picture film and DVD are nothing more than the exploitation of a real life honorable, courageous, and long serving member of our country's armed forces, by greedy multi-billion dollar 'entertainment' corporations, which engaged in the very simple – though unconscionable and unlawful – act of plagiarizing the name, likeness, mannerisms, habits, and intimate and personal life story of Plaintiff Staff Sgt. Jeffrey S. Sarver, for the sole commercial purpose of unjustly enriching the Defendants…" [33]

Sarver went on to explain how Boal and others came to acquire this information about him:

"To facilitate the immediate release of factually correct military operations related information, the Department of Defense promulgated the embedded media policy, whereby designated media representatives would be selected for long term, minimally restrictive access to US forces through 'embedding', whereby the media will actually live, work, and travel as part of a military unit…In exchange…the media agreed to be bound by the 'Ground Rules' applicable to the embedded media…One of the Ground Rules… restricts the type of information to be released/published by the media. For example, release/publication of a service

member's personal information is …limited to the member's name and hometown only, and then only on condition the service member has provided consent." [34]

While claiming that Boal "essentially exclusively followed and accompanied" Sarver and his unit, Sarver alleges that Boal "stated, represented to, and assured…[Sarver] he was working on a report/story about EOD operations in Iraq, *in general.*" [35] Sarver also alleges that Bigelow knew of Boal's "upcoming embedment" as early as 2003 and "shared" with Boal how Boal could use the experiences of his embedment to write a screenplay for a "commercial movie". [36] Expressing an obvious sense of betrayal in that Sarver "and his team fed, sheltered, personally protected, and ensured the safety of…." Boal [37] and claiming that he never knew that Boal intended to publish personal information about Sarver, "in which selected parts are even untrue and defamatory", [38] Sarver alleges that he informed Boal that he "did not approve" of and requested that Boal's *Playboy* article, which focused "not on EOD *in general*, but [Sarver]…and his personal life," not be published. [39] In essence, Sarver claims, however, that the "Defendants" told Sarver that it was too late, because the article had already been published. [40]

With the U.S. theatrical release nearly four years later of *The Hurt Locker*, Sarver's complaint goes on to catalogue both the similarities of the William James character to Sarver and the defamatory manner in which the movie portrays Sarver through the William James character. In Sarver's view, the movie portrays Sarver, as a "bad father", a father who is "ashamed of his son", a "messed up" soldier, "an unstable person" and a "soldier who violates military rules". [41] According to Sarver, the release of the movie violated the military ground rules for the embedment of reporters, which barred the release of personal information, and Sarver as a "3rd party intended beneficiary under this contract" is entitled to enforce its remedies for that breach. [42] The movie also exposed Sarver to "an increased risk of harm or even death during future deployments in a war zone (further inciting enemies to hunt down this high profile bomb squad hero…)." [43]

When interviewed, Renner in a video posted on YouTube notes, "There's one guy that they knew was like James the character I played….That's why I started kicking the trunk."
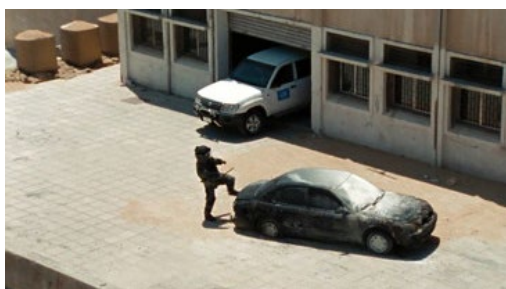
Sgt. James, a "wild man," kicks open a car trunk filled with bombs.

Boal claims that Sarver did not use a smoke grenade during the first mission, while Sarver claims that Boal watched Sarver use a smoke grenade to create a diversion for potential snipers.

In reporting on the filing of the lawsuit, *The LA Times* quoted Sarver's attorney as saying at a press conference: "They're going to owe him a whole lot of money and recognition." In contrast, Boal denied that William James was modeled after Sarver. "Like a lot of soldiers, he identifies with the film, but the character I wrote is fictional. The film is a work of fiction inspired by many people's stories." He also denied Sarver's claim that he, Sarver, had coined the term "hurt locker". [44] [open endnotes in new window]

The lawsuit, in fact, contained the seeds for its own self-destruction. "Forum shopping", namely selecting a courthouse where a jury will likely be sympathetic to a party's claim or where the law is more favorable, is a time-honored practice. Notwithstanding that Boal had interviewed Sarver in Wisconsin and that subsequently in late 2011 Sarver had retired from the military to Wisconsin, [45] Sarver chose to file his lawsuit in New Jersey. Sarver's connection to New Jersey was that he had been stationed in Dover, New Jersey, at the time that the movie was initially released. [46] As Sarver has acknowledged, [47] in contrast to New Jersey, the laws of California, where nearly all of the named defendants resided, was "a more amenable forum to their legal arguments" and "arguably more beneficial to them."

Not surprisingly, therefore, the defendants immediately moved to dismiss or transfer Sarver's New Jersey lawsuit to California. Opposing that motion, Sarver argued that the court had personal jurisdiction over the defendants, since the movie had been released theatrically, and hence Sarver had been harmed, in New Jersey. [48] However, in deciding whether to retain a lawsuit in a selected forum, a court considers both whether it has personal jurisdiction over the defendants as well as whether a selected forum is appropriate. In the context of a motion to transfer, a court looks to "convenience" factors, such as

- the residence of the parties,
- the location of the relevant documents,
- whether knowledgeable third party witnesses are within the court's jurisdiction, and
- "the interests of justice."

Unfortunately for Sarver, while the New Jersey court had personal jurisdiction over the defendants, Sarver had alleged in his complaint that, while he had resided "at all times relevant" in Dover, New Jersey, he had resided at his new military posting in Clarksville, Tennessee since August 2009. [49] The New Jersey court seized upon that admission. [50] While a party's selected forum is normally given deference in deciding whether the venue is appropriate, in this case Sarver had no present connection with New Jersey. It was not his "home forum." In contrast, none of the defendants, documents or events relating to Sarver's claims had any connection with New Jersey; to the contrary, nearly all were located in or connected with California. Thus, on November 18, 2010, the New Jersey court found that "convenience" dictated that Sarver's selected forum not be given deference and transferred the case to California. Sarver's "choice of New Jersey as a forum seems nothing less than arbitrary," observed the court. [51]

Sarver's position quickly began to unravel once his lawsuit was transferred to California. California had enacted in 1992 what is known as an anti-SLAPP law [52] that tilts heavily in favor of, and discourages lawsuits which might chill, free speech. First, it permits a defendant to strike a lawsuit involving conduct in furtherance of free speech on a matter of public interest, "unless the court

According to Boal, Sarver never fired at the windshield or tires of a taxi or pressed his weapon to the driver's forehead, while Saver claims that Boal witnessed him fire through the windshield of a car and press his pistol to the forehead of the driver.

Boal claims that Sarver never befriended an Iraqi child selling DVDs, while Sarver says that Boal observed him befriend Iraqi children when he purchased their trinkets and other wares.

Boal claims that Sarver never killed insurgents in a firefight in the desert, while Sarver claims that he told Boal about one such engagement.

determines that the plaintiff has established that there is a probability that the plaintiff will prevail." Emphasis added. Second, while such a motion to strike is pending, all discovery is stayed. And third, a defendant who prevails in making such a motion "shall" recover its attorney's fees from the plaintiff. [53]

Thus, the defendants soon moved to strike the complaint through three separate sets of attorneys – those of Summit Entertainment and other entities connected with the production and financing of *The Hurt Locker*, those of Bigelow and Boal, who had common counsel, and those of Playboy Enterprises. [54] The burden was now on Sarver to demonstrate a probability that he would prevail in the lawsuit. Sarver apparently sought informal discovery, including the depositions of Bigelow and Boal, and identified, in particular, the discovery of evidence needed supposedly in order to respond adequately to the disputed factual issues raised by the defendants in their motion. [55] Nevertheless, no discovery was apparently ever taken, notwithstanding a federal appellate court decision holding that California's automatic stay of discovery "collides with" the analogous federal procedural rule. [56] Worse yet, the possibility of Sarver having to pay the defendants' expenses now hung in the balance if he failed to defeat the defendants' motion to strike.

While the lawyers exchanged "briefs" setting forth their legal arguments, it is the sworn statements exchanged by Boal and Sarver that highlight the sharp difference in perspective as to what had transpired. According to Boal, "Plaintiff [57] [Sarver] voluntarily participated in hours of interviews with me. I never informed Plaintiff that I would not utilize any details of his life in the Playboy Article, nor did he make any such request to me. Plaintiff was aware that I was writing an article about him." [58] As to the William James character in *The Hurt Locker*, Boal reiterated what he had stated when interviewed by the *LA Times*:

> "William James is a fictional character that is a product of my imagination. Certain elements of the character were inspired by different people that I have met throughout my life, including… members of the United States military…Indeed, prior to writing the screenplay for the Film, I interviewed in excess of 50 to 60 military personnel who were involved with explosive ordnance disposal." [59]

Boal then catalogues 29 examples of ways in which the William James character differs from Sarver, mentioning, for example,

- that Sarver did not have an African-American member on his EOD team;
- that Sarver met his team members in the United States, not in Iraq;
- that Sarver never removed the plywood from his housing unit;
- that Sarver never responded to a car bomb near a United Nations building; and
- that Sarver never pursued insurgents with the two members of his team through the back alleys of Baghdad. [60]

Boal also explained the origin of the term "hurt locker" as dating back to the Vietnam War and of the phrase "war is a drug" as originating from a 2002 book by *The New York Times* war correspondent Chris Hodges. [61] As to the claim that Boal had signed an agreement with the Department of Defense not to write the *Playboy* article or the film screenplay, Boal states: "I do not recall ever signing such an agreement and it would have made no sense for me to do so," since the purpose of his embedment was "for the express purpose of writing an article about EOD teams." [62]

Sarver's recounting of events sharply differs. Advised by his command of Boal's "upcoming 30-day embedment,"

> "we were told to accommodate Mr. Boal since he was embedded for the purpose of reporting on/writing about, EOD operations in Iraq, *in*

According to Boal, Sarver never encountered an innocent Iraqi with a bomb strapped to his body. According to Sarver, he told Boal about how he removed bombs strapped to the bodies of insurgents, one of whom ended up detonating himself.

If Sarver's right of publicity claim were upheld, would Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* (1941), which was based on the life of William Randolph Hearst, not have been made?

Would James Cameron's *Titanic* (1997), which was based on historical events and characters, not have been made?

general. Because Mr. Boal was an embedded journalist/reporter it was my understanding Mr. Boal and our unit were subject to the government issued embedded media 'ground rules'." [63]

Sarver then attaches what he claimed is a copy of those 'ground rules'. [64] While acknowledging that Boal took photographs and "audios" of Sarver and that Boal learned about the personal details of Sarver's life through their daily, constant contact, Sarver claims that Boal personally assured Sarver that he would be writing about EOD operations in general and that had he, Sarver, known otherwise he would not have responded as he did to Boal's questioning. [65] Sarver goes on to explain why Boal's embedment was supposedly limited to Sarver's unit:

"Mr. Boal commented to me that he did not feel safe around the other EOD teams/members, and that he did not feel safe going out on EOD missions…unless I was there." [66]

Sarver adds:

"Throughout Mr. Boal's embedment, my team and I sheltered, personally protected, and ensured the personal safety of Mr. Boal." [67]

Sarver, in turn, catalogues 29 examples of how the movie represents a portrayal of Sarver. [68] Sarver points, for example, to

- Jeremy Renner's impersonation of certain physical characteristics of Sarver (which supposedly Jeremy Renner acknowledged on a YouTube video); [69]
- William James' sleeping while wearing his bomb helmet and his showering while fully dressed in his army uniform;
- James' unsuccessful struggle to maintain his family relationship in contrast to that of the other members of his team;
- James' record at having disarmed more IEDs than any other soldier;
- his removal of his bomb suit in order to work in the close confines of a car bomb; and
- James' characterization as a soldier who is "abnormally fascinated" with death to the point where it takes on greater importance than his family. [70]

Sarver acknowledges that he did not invent the term "hurt locker" but rather claims that he explained, when questioned by Boal, its meaning to Boal in the same way that he explained the meaning of the phrase "war is a drug" ("at the time [Mr. Boal] was supplying our unit with alcoholic beverages"). [71] Moreover, notwithstanding the differences described by Boal between the movie character James and Sarver, Sarver claims that "colleagues, family members, and friends" recognized William James as Sarver. [72]

The sworn statements of Boal and Sarver differ or qualify one another on numerous, other points. For example:

- Boal claims that he was embedded with Sarver's unit for 14 days; Sarver claims that Boal was with him for 30 days. [73]
- Boal claims that Sarver did not use a smoke grenade during his first mission; Sarver claims that Boal watched Sarver's use a smoke grenade to create a diversion with respect to potential snipers. [74]
- Boal claims that Sarver never fired at the windshield or tires of a taxi or pressed his pistol to the driver's forehead; Sarver claims that Boal observed him discharge his pistol through the windshield of an Iraqi motor vehicle and press his pistol to the forehead of an Iraqi driver. [75]
- Boal claims that Sarver never befriended an Iraqi child who was selling

Would Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), which was based on the Niland brothers, not have been made?

Johnny Carson successfully sued the maker of "Here's Johnny" toilets.

DVDs; Sarver says that Boal observed Sarver befriend Iraqi children "from whom I would often purchase whatever trinkets or wares they were trying to sell." [76]

- Boal claims that Sarver never killed insurgents in a firefight in the desert; Sarver claims that he told Boal of how Sarver had been involved in a desert fight while providing security to "mechanics fixing a vehicle" and had used the "Barrett sniper rifle." [77]
- Boal claims that Sarver never encountered an innocent Iraqi civilian with a bomb strapped to his body which Sarver was then unable to diffuse; Sarver claims that he told Boal of how Sarver had on numerous occasions removed bombs that "were attached to and just inside the bodies of insurgents," including a description of how Sarver had encountered a suicide bomber detonating himself. [78]

Sarver's legal claims and the law

Sarver's principle grievance, as reflected in its being the first of the seven claims in his complaint, was that Boal, Bigelow and the producers of the film *The Hurt Locker* had unfairly taken ("misappropriated") Sarver's life story for their own commercial advantage. As such, they had violated his "right of publicity". Significantly, a right of publicity claim arises under state, not federal, law and as such the right to and the scope of such a claim varies from state to state. [79] Typically such a claim is applied to celebrities whose name, likeness or other indicia of fame is taken without the celebrity's consent and then used to market and sell commercial products. For example, courts have applied such a claim where a phrase associated with the TV talk show host Johnny Carson ("Here's Johnny") was used to sell toilets; [80] and where a robot, which evoked the appearance of game show hostess Vanna White, appeared on a set resembling a game show in order to sell Samsung electronics. [81] Nevertheless, a right of publicity claim can also be applied to the taking without consent of a non-celebrity's name and likeness and the subsequent commercialization of that name and likeness. [82]

Ironically, Sarver's status as a celebrity and the pubic recognition, if any, of him as the basis for the William James character had surely, in part, resulted from Boal's *Playboy* article. Moreover, it is hard not to view his grievance of injury as real, not hypothetical, given that he remained in the military. As he stated in opposing the motion to strike his complaint, the film's portrayal of him as William James had "essentially placed a bulls-eye on the back of my army uniform/bomb suit." Soldiers "jokingly ask for my autograph." He is "constantly harassed about the movie and article" for "selling my movie rights." And he feels the distress of "how my son will react" as well as others' reaction at his portrayal as "a reckless soldier and idiot." [83] It is not that Sarver's claim of injury is without infirmity.

- There is clearly an element of legalese to these claimed injuries;
- these injuries are surely difficult to quantify;
- the *Playboy* article published several years before had already exposed Sarver to at least some of these injuries; and
- the timing of the lawsuit only days prior to Oscar suggests an effort at maximizing the return on Sarver's "investment" in the lawsuit.

Nevertheless, it is difficult also not to be sympathetic to his plight. A soldier, who has been awarded a Bronze Star for disarming more IEDs than any other soldier and is, as such, a genuine war hero, now sees himself as the basis or at least an inspiration for the central character in a movie with worldwide publicity not of his own choosing.

A movie, however, is neither a toilet nor a commercial advertisement for consumer

Game show celebrity Vanna White successfully sued….
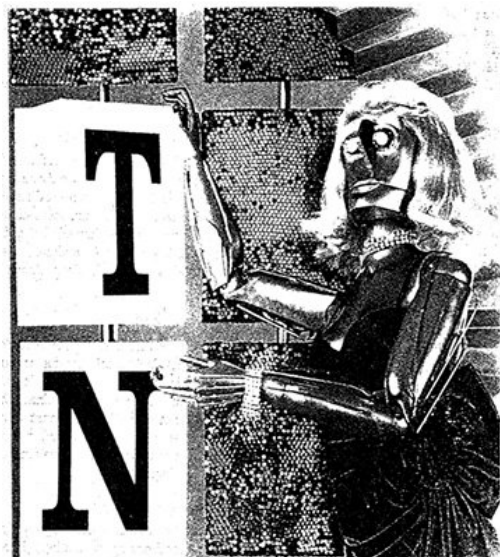
... Samsung for promoting electronics with a Vanna White look-alike robot.

products. While in 1915 the U.S. Supreme Court [84] had found that movies were a "business pure and simple" and "not… part of the press," by 1952 the Court [85] had reversed itself, finding that Roberto Rossellini's *The Miracle* could not be barred by a New York state agency based on a finding that the movie was "sacrilegious." The court wrote:

> "It cannot be doubted that motion pictures are a significant medium for the communication of ideas. They may affect public attitudes and behavior….The importance of motion pictures as an organ of public opinion is not lessened by the fact that they are designed to entertain as well as to inform."

Thus, the right of an individual to be free from unwanted commercialization must be balanced against the right of free speech where the "product," in this case a movie, is an expressive medium. Indeed, with the passage of time courts have broadened the scope of potentially expressive media so as to include tee shirts, trading cards and most recently video games. As to this last, [86] the U.S. Supreme invalidated a California law which restricted the sale or rental of violent video games to minors.

> "Like protected books, plays, and movies…video games communicate ideas – and even social messages – through many familiar literary devices (such as characters, dialogue, plot, and music) and through features distinctive to the medium (such as the player's interaction with the virtual world)."

If movies are an expressive medium, how is the right of free speech in that medium to be balanced against the right of an individual to be free from unwanted commercialization of his or her name or likeness? Only once has the U.S. Supreme Court addressed this issue. [87] Interpreting the state of Ohio's right of publicity law, the U.S. Supreme Court balanced the two competing rights by analogizing to the U.S. Copyright Act, in particular, to the concept of "fair use" under that Act. The Copyright Act identifies four separate factors in deciding whether the use made of a copyrighted work is "fair": (1) the purpose and character of the use, (2) the nature of the copyrighted work, (3) the amount of the taking relative to the copyrighted work as a whole, and (4) the effect of the use upon value of the copyrighted work. [88] In the case before the Supreme Court, a television station had broadcast in its entirety a "human cannonball act" without the performer's consent. The Court, therefore, held that the right of the broadcaster to exercise its free speech was outweighed by the performer's right not to have his entire act duplicated without payment. The Court reasoned:

> "The Constitution [i.e. the First Amendment right to free speech] no more prevents a State from requiring respondent [the broadcaster] to compensate petitioner [the performer] for broadcasting his act on television than it would privilege respondent to film and broadcast a

The U.S. Supreme Court in 1952 holds that Robert Rossellini's *L'amore* or *The Miracle* (1948) is entitled to protection as free speech under the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution.

copyrighted dramatic work without liability to the copyright owner... The broadcast of a film of petitioner's entire act poses a substantial threat to the economic value of that performance."

In short, the amount of the taking in combination with the effect of that taking on the value of the act outweighed the broadcaster's right of free speech. Interestingly, the Court observed in a footnote:

"Of course, this case does not involve a claim that respondent would be prevented by petitioner's 'right of publicity' from staging or filming its own 'human cannonball' act."

California's right of publicity statute reads as follows: [89]

"Any person who knowingly uses another's name, voice, signature, photograph, or likeness, in any manner, on or in products, merchandise, or goods, or for purposes of advertising or selling... products...without such person's prior consent...shall be liable for any damages sustained by the person...injured as a result thereof."

The law on its face makes no distinction between celebrities and non-celebrities. [90] Faced in 2001 with a case in which free speech conflicted with a right of publicity claim, the California Supreme Court [91] adopted a "transformative" test in determining the balance to be struck between the rights of publicity and free speech. The U.S. Supreme Court had already adopted a "transformative" test in characterizing "the purpose and character" fair use factor under the U.S. Copyright Act. [92] The issue, reasoned the U.S. Supreme Court, is

"whether the new work...merely 'supersede[s] the objects' of the original creation...or instead adds something new, with a further purpose or different character altering the first with new expression, meaning or message".

The California Supreme Court, however, formulated its own definition of what constitutes a "transformative" work, disregarding all of the other "fair use" factors.

"We ask...whether a product containing a celebrity's likeness is so transformed that it has become primarily the defendant's own expression rather than the celebrity's likeness...The inquiry is in a sense more quantitative than qualitative, asking whether the literal and imitative or the creative elements predominate...In sum,...the artist....may raise as an affirmative defense that the work is protected by the First Amendment inasmuch as it contains significant transformative elements or that the value of the work does not derive primarily from the celebrity's fame..."

The U.S. Supreme Court in 1977 holds, however, that free speech does not bar a right of publicity claim for the wholesale broadcasting of a human cannonball act.

While observing that Andy Warhol's silkscreens of celebrities, such as Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley, are transformative in that they are "a form of ironic social comment on the dehumanization of celebrity itself," it held in the case before it that charcoal drawings which literally depicted the Three Stooges were not.

The California Supreme Court holds in 2001 that the copying of an individual's persona in an expressive medium, such as a movie, is lawfully protected free speech when the copying has "transformed" the persona. In the case before it, the court found that a charcoal drawing of the Three Stooges was not "transformative".

Andy Warhol's *Marilyn* would, however, be "transformative, " according to the California Supreme Court.
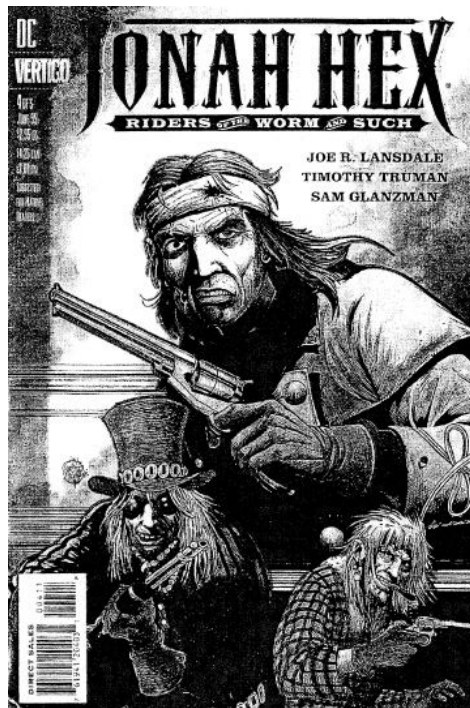
Applying this same test two years later, the California Supreme Court [93] found "transformative" comic book images which were not literal depictions of the plaintiffs but instead images "half-human and half-worm – in a larger story which is itself quite expressive." The court found irrelevant evidence that the publisher of the comic books was trading on plaintiffs' reputation in order to market its comic books, since the comic books themselves were "transformative."

Other California courts applying this "transformative" test have found instances of both transformative and non-transformative uses. On the one hand, a space-themed video game which included a character who resembled the lead singer to a musical group but whose physique, hair style, costume and dance moves differed was found "transformative." [94] On the other hand, examples of "non-transformative" uses have included the following:

- greeting cards on which appeared the image of a celebrity placed in a setting similar to a TV episode for which the celebrity was known and which included a phrase associated with that celebrity; [95]
- a football video game which included the image of a quarterback displaying many characteristics associated with the quarterback, such as his jersey number, weight and height; [96] and
- a video game with avatars of rock band members who perform rock songs "as literal recreations of the band members," notwithstanding, as the court observed, that the avatars can be manipulated to appear in "fanciful venues," such as outer space," or to perform songs to which the band members would object. [97]

California's right of publicity applies to non-celebrities, in this case a person whose "Like" designation was used to advertise a "sponsored story".

Two years later the California Supreme Court finds "transformative" images of well-known musicians in which they appear as "half-human and half-worm – in a larger story which is itself quite expressive."

Greeting cards are not "transformative" where Paris Hilton appears on those cards together with the phrase "that's hot".

Interestingly, those courts finding the uses non-transformative commented upon the context in which the celebrity was placed as being the same as that in which the celebrity normally appears. For example, the videogame placed the quarterback in the context of a football videogame.

Go to page 3

In contrast to California, New York looks to whether the content is related to the use of the celebrity's name not a disguised ad or commercial product. Ginger Rogers' claim against Frederico Fellini's *Ginger and Fred* (1986) fails where the movie is about Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire imitators.

The judge's decision and the issues it raises

While still a graduate film student at Columbia, Kathryn Bigelow apparently interviewed Nicholas Ray. Ray has been celebrated for his romantic portrayals of outsiders, such as ex-GI and screenwriter "Dix" Steele (Humphrey Bogart) in *In a Lonely Place* (1950) ...

… or the adolescent Jim Stark (James Dean) in *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955).

While it appears that the federal judge in California assigned to oversee the case, Jacqueline H. Nguyen, [98] [open endnotes in new page] directed the parties to mediate privately their dispute based on a stipulation of the parties, [99] the court docket, given the normally confidential nature of mediation, is silent as to what, if anything, transpired. [100] Thus, it is against this background of caselaw, which seeks to balance two conflicting rights, that Boal, Bigelow and the producers moved to strike Sarver's complaint. Once the motion was fully briefed by both sides and the conflicting sworn statements submitted, the judge issued on August 4, 2011, a tentative ruling whereby she rejected the defendants' "transformative use" defense. She found that Sarver had presented evidence that (1) he was identifiable as the main character, (2) the movie character was based on him, and (3) he had not consented to the use. She dismissed, however, all of the remaining claims. [101] On August 8, 2011, she heard oral argument from the attorneys. [102]

On October 13, 2011, however, Judge Nguyen reversed her tentative ruling and issued an opinion in which she struck Sarver's complaint in its entirety. [103] That opinion does not address and is wholly silent on Sarver's request to take discovery, including those areas of inquiry specifically identified. Instead, after initially finding that California law applied to Sarver's claim [104] and that the "[d]efendants [w]ere [e]ngaged in the [e]xercise of [f]ree [s]peech in [c]onnection to a [p]ublic [i]ssue," the court held that Sarver had failed to show a "[p]robability of [p]revailing" on any of his claims. The court specifically found that Sarver's claim involved a matter of "public interest" by reasoning as follows:

> "…[T]he alleged portrayal of Plaintiff in the movie is connected to an issue of public interest, given Plaintiff's service in the Iraq war, the importance of EOD technicians…, the high-level of danger of Plaintiff's duties, and Plaintiff's claims that he disarmed more IEDs than any single team…"

Turning to Sarver's right of publicity claim, the court found that "even if the Will James character was based on Plaintiff [Sarver], no reasonable trier of fact could conclude that the work was not transformative…." [105] In other words, she upheld the defendants' "transformative use" defense. She reasoned as follows: "To illustrate the expressive content contributed, Defendants cite 29 differences between Plaintiff's real life experience and the portrayal of Will James." Moreover, "the value of *The Hurt Locker* unquestionably derived from the creativity and skill of the writers [*sic*], directors and producers…Whatever recognition or fame Plaintiff may have achieved, it had little to do with the success of the movie."

The court then went on to strike all of the remaining claims:

- The defamation claim failed as matter of law, since "…the Court does

Megan (Jamie Lee Curtis) in *Blue Steel* (1989) is both attracted to and fearful of Eugene (Ron Silver), a stockbroker who enjoys the thrill of his killing spree in which he etches his bullets with Megan's name on them.

FBI agent Johnny Utah (Kneau Reeves) in *Point Break* (1991) both hunts down and is drawn to Bodhi (Patrick Swayze), the leader of a group of surfers who rob banks to support their desire to surf the ultimate wave.

In *Strange Days* (1995) Lenny (Ralph Fiennes)

not agree with Plaintiff's characterization of Will James as a man who does not love his son...finds no support in the movie for Plaintiff's allegation that he is portrayed as a man who had no respect or compassion for human life" and found nothing "provably false" in the depiction of Will James' fascination with death given the statements made by Sarver in the Playboy article. Likewise, there was no evidentiary support for Sarver's allegation that the fictional scene in which James uses a fire extinguisher on a burning car bomb had exposed Sarver to contempt, ridicule or injury in his occupation as a soldier.

- There was no false light claim, because James, assuming his character was based on Sarver, "was portrayed as a war hero, struggling with presumably the same conflicts experienced by many modern military soldiers..."
- There was no breach of contract claim with respect to the military Ground Rules, since, among other reasons, Sarver "voluntarily discussed his background and experiences with Boal, thereby implicitly consenting to the publication of that information."
- The claim for "intentional infliction of emotional distress" failed, since the defendants' conduct was not "outrageous: "it is commonplace that movies are based on real events", Sarver voluntarily submitted to the interviews, and the movie "used a fictional name for the character..."
- The fraud claim also failed, since, among other reasons, Sarver submitted no "admissible evidence that Boal misrepresented that his only intent was to report on EOD technicians in general [or] ... obfuscated the fact that he was writing a screenplay based on the *Playboy* article."

In accordance with California's anti-SLAPP law, the court summarily found that the defendants, as the prevailing parties, were entitled to an award of their attorney's fees.

As of this writing, the case is on appeal to the Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit. [106] The appellate court, after conferring with counsel, determined that the case was not appropriate for inclusion in its mediation program, [107] and briefing was to be completed in September. [108] Sarver has argued on appeal that the trial court should not have applied California law, since he had been stationed for two years and hence suffered at the time of the movie's release his injury in New Jersey. Moreover, the court should have denied the defendants' motion to strike even under California law, since

> "Sarver was not placed in a setting different....[but rather t]he Will James (Jeremy Renner) character was simply walking in Jeffrey Sarver's shoes". [109]

In contrast, the defendants have argued that the law of California, where nearly all parties reside, not of New Jersey, where Sarver happened to be stationed, governs. Moreover, the movie is "transformative" insofar as any similarities between William James and Sarver consist of "generic similarities" and Sarver's "likeness" is but one of the many "raw materials" in a work created by the director, screenwriter, actors, and others. [110] In the meantime Boal has continued to maintain that "The Hurt Locker was inspired by many soldiers I met and interviewed during my time reporting in Iraq and elsewhere." He has also added:

> "It was a disservice to all of those other soldiers for Sgt. Sarver

is obsessively in love with the destructive Faith (Juliette Lewis), but he ultimately chooses security driver Mace (Angela Bassett), disappearing into the crowd in the process.

While chosen because of his party loyalty to take charge of the K-19 submarine, Captain Alexei Vostrikov (Harrison Ford) in *K-19: The Widowmaker* (2002) nevertheless chooses to countermand the party's orders. He evacuates his crew to a nearby Soviet submarine, thereby remaining loyal to his men so that they might return safely home.

On October 13, 2011, Judge Jacqueline Nguyen of the United States District Court for the Central District of California issues her opinion in which she finds that the movie *The Hurt Locker* is "transformative" of Sarver's persona and dismisses Sarver's complaint in its entirety. She later finds that Sarver is liable to Bigelow, Boal and the other defendants for attorney's fees of about $187,000.

to claim that he was the only soldier that was the basis for the hero of the film. I am glad that the Court has decided to dismiss the lawsuit." [111]

Underscoring the significance to the Hollywood film industry of the issues raised by Sarver's lawsuit and his appeal, the Motion Picture Association of American and the Entertainment Merchants Association filed a joint *amici curiae* – or "friends of the court" - brief. [112] The MPAA and the EMA argue that motion pictures, like books and other writings throughout history, draw upon "actual events and people", identifying such well-known films as *The King's Speech*, *Erin Brockovich*, *The Perfect Storm* and *The Social Network*, and that if Sarver's claim were upheld, then numerous films would never have been made, such as Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane*, Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* or James Cameron's *Titanic*. Thus, they argue for a broad interpretation of the First Amendment when applied to right of publicity claims in the context of expressive media. Either such claims should be barred entirely or permitted only when the name or likeness is used to attract attention and is unrelated to the work. [113]

A test that balances conflicting rights is necessarily subjective, value driven, so that a decision on those rights reflects the relative values of the trier of fact. Thus, the trial court's decision raises as many questions as it answers. Does adding 29 imaginative facts transform the presence of 29 facts taken from Sarver's life, particularly if some of those imaginative facts are in dispute as to whether they are imaginary? Why is a quantitative test, which simply adds up the number of new facts, appropriate rather than a qualitative test, which examines the nature of the elements and whether those elements when taken together are genuinely "transformative"? Is it of no significance that Boal wrote the *Playboy* article, which arguably transformed Sarver into a public figure and that the movie in which Sarver's alleged "avatar" then appeared duplicates the context from which the events from Sarver's life were taken?

On the other hand, if Sarver has not achieved sufficient celebrity or public figure status, are Boal, Bigelow and the film producers entitled to commercially exploit Sarver's life? Is not the commercial exploitation of his private life all the more problematic if he has not achieved that celebrity or public figure status? Is the reason for the movie's commercial success the issue or whether and to what extent Sarver has been recognized, whether by friends or a segment of the public, as the source for the movie's content? Is the exploitation of an individual's right of publicity limited to an economic taking or cannot the exploitation consist of benefiting from the intangibles of that person's privacy? If it is in the public interest to dramatize events based on a person's life, should that interest require that that person be compensated in some manner? In the case of a non-celebrity, is the extent to which the movie has appropriated that person's persona and life story relevant? For example, should a distinction be drawn between an incidental appearance of a non-celebrity's persona in a movie and a movie which focuses entirely upon that persona? As to a non-celebrity's, is not the civility and respect accorded to one person's privacy no less culturally important than the openness resulting from another person's right to free speech?

And what of the manner in which the trial court dismissed factual issues contested by the parties? If Sarver testifies that Boal said to him that the *Playboy* article was to be about EOD technicians in general and Boal testifies to the contrary, why is Boal's testimony, not Sarver's, to be credited? In deciding whether a valid claim has been alleged, is it the role

The case is now on appeal to the US Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit.

William James tells his baby son that when we grow up, we love so much, including mommy, daddy, pajamas and the jack-in-the-box, but as we age, they no longer seem so special. We come to love less and less, realizing that even the jack-in-the-box is made of pieces of tin.
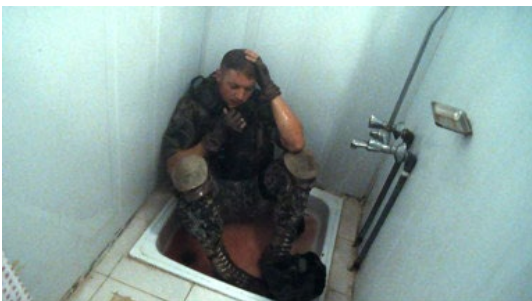
"Sarver sits down and takes a deep breath. He looks into the calm Michigan evening, in the nation he has sworn to protect….Then Staff

of a judge to act as film critic, finding as a matter of law that the William James character displays compassion for others and is portrayed as a "war hero, struggling with presumably the same conflicts experienced by many modern military soldiers"? Indeed, in deciding that the movie is sufficiently "transformative," is not the court implicitly finding that the movie is more a narrative about the US war in Iraq than a character study and as such engaging in a critique as to the meaning of the movie?

It is unclear how the federal appellate court will balance Sarver's right of publicity claim against the defendants' free speech defense given the current record before the court. Undoubtedly a greater value placed on the free speech relative to an individual's right of privacy would favor the defendants and vice versa. *The Hurt Locker* is not a literal depiction of Sarver's life but instead adds fictional elements. As such, the issue may be whether the appellate court will find either that Sarver was entitled to take discovery and hence will remand the case to the trial court so as to permit discovery or find that there is sufficient dispute as to what is fiction and what is fact so as to call into question whether there are "significant transformative elements". Alternatively, if the appellate court makes neither finding, then the court may, for example, choose to affirm the trial court's finding that the use made of Sarver's life was sufficiently "transformative", disregard the "transformative" use test and apply a more liberal standard in the context of expressive media or strike Sarver's claim by reasoning that

> "[a]ny commercial aspects are 'inextricably entwined' with expressive elements, and so they cannot be separated out 'from the fully protected whole.'" [114]

Regardless, however, of the outcome of the appeal, Bigelow's defense to Sarver's lawsuit represents an ironic commentary on Bigelow's own directorial career. Bigelow has been sympathetic both before she became a film director [115] and as a film director to the outsider who resists conforming to social norms and who struggles to achieve a physical and emotional connection to his or her world, including to others similarly situated. Thus, for example, the character Mae in *Near Dark* (1987) is torn between her nighttime family of vampires and her love for Caleb, whose daytime, "normal" family lacks the emotional genuineness of the former. Likewise, Johnny Utah in *Point Break* (1991) is torn between the cold comfort offered by the spit and polish of the FBI and the free-floating freedom which Bodhi enjoys as the leader of a group of surfers who finance their search for the exhilaration of the ultimate wave by robbing banks. *The Hurt Locker* re-enacts that same struggle. James' story to his son about how as an adult the jack-in-the-box will no longer satisfy and his return in the movie's last sequence to Baghdad fully suited up to defuse bombs underscore Bigelow's empathy with James' plight.

Indeed, as a filmmaker Bigelow has largely pursued a career as an outsider to Hollywood. The publicity surrounding the Oscar nominations to both her and James Cameron can be read not only as a competition between former spouses but also as a contrast in differing positions within the movie industry – the independent director of art-house films as opposed to the highly successful, commercial filmmaker. The decision in the lawsuit enshrines Bigelow's freedom to express her artistic vision, but it does so at the expense of another person lower on the economic food chain. Ironically, while she publicly and enthusiastically praises on Oscar night

the valor of our heroic soldiers, she glosses over the consequences of her personal responsibility to them. "We're there for them," she announced - but only so long as it costs her nothing?

The obvious question is why Bigelow and Boal apparently embarked upon their artistic project but never sought to make Sarver a member of their "family" engaged in that project. While Boal allegedly disclosed to Sarver after the publication of the *Playboy* article Boal's intention to write a screenplay, did neither Boal nor Bigelow not think to engage Sarver somehow in their project? Leaving aside what the law may require, why did neither one early on, for example, not offer to Sarver that he act as consultant to the production and/or offer to compensate him in some manner if the film were commercially successful? Either could have approached Sarver without conceding or otherwise admitting, as is typical in negotiations, that Sarver was entitled to any compensation. Were they conservatively counseled, as a prophylactic measure, not to do so, particularly lest they set a "precedent"? [116] Or did Bigelow and Boal, as liberal intellectuals, simply never empathize with the conservative leanings and lifestyle of Sarver, notwithstanding their sympathies for the fictional William James? Did they lack the compassion to understand one no less a professional than themselves - but in the context of the everyday, mundane working class soldier who disarms bombs, rather than the rarified atmosphere of the creator of aesthetic visions?

Increasingly, the First Amendment limits those who would speak with their voices and instead empowers those with the capital to speak. [117] In Sarver's case, if the trial court's decision is affirmed on appeal, Sarver will be obligated to pay the substantial expenses of Bigelow, Boal and the producers of the movie resulting from their far greater resources which were brought to bear in defending against Sarver's lawsuit. The defendants collectively sought reimbursement of nearly $ 220,000 in expenses, [118] and the trial court has approved about $187,000. [119] Recently retired from the military in late 2011 after 20 years of service [120] and not offering to post during his appeal either a bond or other form of security so that the defendants may now seek to enforce their judgments, [121] Sarver claims that the defendants' collective judgments, if and when enforced, will result in his filing for bankruptcy. [122] The tactical decision to file suit in New Jersey and the resulting transfer to California plainly ratcheted up the stakes, and Sarver, in seeking to vindicate his alleged rights, now finds himself financially crushed.

Sadly, the outcome to date of Sarver's lawsuit exemplifies the truism that the privileges of the law are not equivalent to the empathy demanded by ethics and morality. Ironically, Bigelow's own films make clear that distinction. Bodhi and his family of surfers rob banks, but Bigelow nevertheless empathizes with them throughout the film. What is the theme of Bigelow's *K-19: The Widowmaker* (2002) but that the law demanded by the state can be no substitute for the morality which defines the family? Captain Alexei Vostrikov is transformed from loyal party member, who unquestioningly follows the orders of the state, to submarine commander, who countermands the orders of his superiors so that the remaining members of his loyal crew might survive the journey back home.

Art is increasingly a commodity, and motion pictures, which seek to entertain masses of people, have always been a business. As courts have recognized, however, they can also express ideas and in the case of Bigelow's films render significant, cultural commentary. Nevertheless, is it enough for an artist, such as Bigelow, simply to portray the struggles of her

Sergeant Jeffrey S. Sarver, the best bomb tech in Baghdad, puts his dead in his hands, and for two hours straight he cries." (*Playboy* article, 153

characters to find a place outside of social norms where emotional connections can be made? Or should she not also embody and exemplify that struggle in her own life? If Bigelow had no legal obligation to Sarver, did she not have an ethical or moral obligation? The law is not equivalent to the ethical and moral obligations we owe to one another. As one court has observed in an entirely different context:

> "While the Court finds some aspects of [defendant's] business practices troubling and perhaps unethical, it has been unable to find a legal remedy for conduct that may offend generally accepted standards of business. '[Ethical] obligations that exist but cannot be enforced are ghosts that are seen in the law but are elusive to grasp.'" [123]

When law becomes separated from ethics and morality, then it is frequently only a question of the relative capital of the respective parties. [124] In this case, in telling the story of the jack-in-the-box, Bigelow has created for a real life William James an adulthood in which he remains alone in his bomb suit, a hero in name only. The jack-in-the-box is indeed made of pieces of tin.

Closing remarks

Bigelow's goal as a filmmaker has clearly not been simply to achieve commercial success. Her films as a consequence frequently challenge and make us uncomfortable with the compromises that we make without noticing throughout our lives. Her films are less about their narratives, the sequence of events portrayed, than they are about the portrayals of characters torn between two worlds. Yet her failure in this case to achieve a satisfactory reconciliation with what could arguably be viewed as her own, self-created doppelganger in the form of Sgt. Sarver/James is no less tragic than the similar failures by her own fictional characters – Mae in *Near Dark*, Megan in *Blue Steel*, Johnny Utah in *Point Break* or Lenny in *Strange Days* (1995). The lawsuit against Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker* gives new meaning to oft-repeated admonition: "Never trust the artist. Trust the tale." [125] In originally writing about *The Hurt Locker* I concluded with the following observation:

> "[T]he drug-induced state in which she [Bigelow] takes pleasure ("war is a drug"), so reminiscent of the 60s, offers her and her characters the only escape from the boredom and constraints of social norms. The sometimes emotional schizophrenia of her films, the psychosis of her characters, such as the self-aware Sergeant William James, display her continued dissatisfaction with those values, even as she acknowledges that no others can be found in her world. "

Bigelow, as cultural critic, is surely attuned to, and responsible for, seeking to make those values which morally satisfy present in her own world.

[Go to Notes](#)

Notes

1. http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc52.2010/ alpertHurtlocker/index.html. [return to page 1 of essay]

2. Declaration of Sgt. Jeffrey S. Sarver, sworn to on March 15, 2011 ("Sarver Dec"). ¶This declaration and other documents from the lawsuit identified in this article were retrieved from the court dockets.

3. The budget for *The Hurt Locker* was apparently about $15 million, and the film grossed about $40 million through its theatrical release with an additional $30 million in DVD sales, as of early to mid-2010. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Hurt_Locker, which was retrieved on May 14, 2012.
In contrast, it has been reported that the production budget of *Avatar* was about $300 and its theatrical gross revenue as approximately $2.7 billion. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Avatar_%282009_film%29 , which was retrieved on May 14, 2012.

4. These excerpts from the acceptance speeches of Bigelow and Boal can be found on The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences website. http://www.oscars.org/awards/academyawards/82/nominees.html, which was retrieved on May 14, 2012.

5. A copy of that decision has been reproduced in The *Hollywood Reporter* of October 13, 2011, at the following site: http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/thr-esq/ read-judges-decision-hurt-locker-248276, which was retrieved on May 14. 2012.

6. A copy of this policy and the rules for embedding the media with US military units was annexed as Exhibit A to Sarver's declaration sworn to on March 15, 2011. The defendants objected to its acceptance as evidence on numerous grounds. The court sustained that objection and declined to consider the rules on the ground that Sarver had failed to properly lay the foundation for the copy that he had filed. A copy of the rules as attached to Sarver's declaration may be found at http://www.defense.gov/news/feb2003/ d20030228pag.pdf, which was retrieved on May 14, 2012.

7. Declaration of Mark Boal, sworn to on March 2, 2011 ("Boal Dec."), ¶ 4; Sarver Dec., ¶ 23.

8. This same article was apparently re-published in 2006 in a condensed version for *Reader's Digest*. Boal states that the editors at *Reader's Digest* informed him that Sarver "participated...with respect to the publication." Boal Dec., ¶ 6. While Sarver acknowledges that he worked with the editors at *Reader's Digest*, in contrast, he claims that he tried to remove certain portions of the article and was told that the article had been sold "as is" by Boal so that there was "not much" Sarver could do. Sarver Dec., ¶ 32

9. The *Playboy* article was reproduced as an 11 page Exhibit A to the Complaint ("*Playboy* article"). The description of Sarver's childhood may be found at *Playboy* article, 6.

10. *Playboy* article, 7.

11. *Playboy* article, 11.

12. *Playboy* article, 2.

13. For example, the article quotes the following exchange between Sarver and EOD team member Williams, thereby conveying Sarver's greater competence relative to Williams but also Sarver's empathy for Williams' shortcomings:

> "Williams, where's the firing device?" Sarver asked.
> "I left it back at the IEDs," Williams replied.
> "Did you cut the wires?"
> "Did you cut them? Did you cut them, Williams?"
> "Yeah."
> "Did you segregate them?"
> "Yeah. But the mortars are getting really close."
> "Why didn't you put the fucking charge on them? Now we have to go back and blow them up!"
>
> The two men were forced to back to the IEDs in order to put a charge on the explosives and detonate them safely... Sarver never held the incident against him. In fact, as they were driving back to Baghdad, Sarver told the younger man that he trusted him and that there was "no tech...he'd rather have at his back."

Playboy article, 6.

14. *Playboy* article, 10.

15. *Playboy* article, 9. The article underscores, however, the difference between Sarver and the colonel in that the colonel later comments, "You wouldn't catch me going down on no fucking bombs". In contrast, the movie emphasizes their similarity in that the colonel is seemingly responsible for the cold-blooded killing of a captured Iraqi insurgent.

16. *Playboy* article, 10.

17. *Playboy* article, 11.

18. *Playboy* article, 9.

19. *Playboy* article, 11 (describing how Sarver's hunting trip results in his not seeing his son "right away" and how he also will miss the birth of his child to his new girlfriend).

20. *Playboy* article, 4 and 8.

21. *Playboy* article, 10.

22. Sarver Dec., ¶ 26.

23. Sarver Dec., Exh. B; and Boal Dec., ¶ 5.

24. Sarver Dec., ¶ 28.

25. Sarver Dec., ¶ 27.

26. Sarver Dec., ¶ 29.

27. Sarver Dec., ¶ 15.

28. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Hurt_Locker - Writing , which was retrieved on May 14, 2012. 2011.

29. *See The New York Times*, December 6, 2011, at A3 ("...[T]he Oscar for best picture, for three consecutive years, has gone to films - [including] "The Hurt Locker" – that used globe-spanning financial networks to create stories aimed at global audiences.".)

30. Like nearly everything else in the lawsuit, how Sarver came to attend the film's screening was disputed. Boal claims that he invited Sarver and others in the military to "advance screenings of the Film." Boal Dec., ¶ 12. Sarver, however, claims that he heard about the premiere of *The Hurt Locker* "through several service members from our garrison" where he was then stationed as well as is insistent that "Mr. Boal never invited me to any advance screening of the film" and that he and others from his garrison attended a premiere showing on their own. Sarver Dec., ¶¶ 35 and 36.

31. Boal Dec., ¶ 12.

32. Supplemental Declaration of First Sgt. Paul Wilcock sworn to on March 18, 2011. The paragraph numbers from this declaration have been omitted from the quoted text.

33. Plaintiff's Complaint and Demand for Jury Trial filed on March 2, 2010 in the United States District Court for the District of New Jersey, Case 2:10-cv-09034-JHN-JC ("Complaint"), ¶ 23.

34. Complaint, ¶¶ 29-31.

35. Complaint ¶ ¶ 42 and 43.

36. Complaint ¶ 40.

37. Complaint ¶ 45.

38. Complaint ¶ 48.

39. Complaint ¶ ¶ 52 – 54.

40. Complaint ¶ 55.

41. Complaint ¶ 79.

42. Complaint ¶ 86.

43. Complaint ¶ 93.

44. *LA Times*, March 4, 2010, http://articles.latimes.com/2010/mar/04/entertainment/la-et-hurt4-2010mar04, which was retrieved on May 14, 2012. [return to page 2]

45. Declaration of Jeffrey S. Sarver sworn to on December 20, 2011, in Wisconsin ("Sarver 2011 Dec."), ¶ ¶ 2 and 3.

46. Complaint ¶ ¶ 1 and 2; Sarver Dec., ¶ ¶ 33, 34, and 38.

47. Plaintiff's Amended Response in Opposition to Defendants' Motion to Dismiss, filed on July 9, 2010, at 17.

48. Sarver relied heavily on a US Supreme Court decision, *Keeton v. Hustler Magazine, Inc.*, 465 U.S. 770 (1984), in which *Hustler* Magazine had unsuccessfully sought to dismiss for lack of personal jurisdiction a case brought by a New York resident in New Hampshire solely because the law of New Hampshire had a longer statute of limitations (six years) and, therefore, was one of the states that did not bar the plaintiff's libel claim. After observing that *Hustler* Magazine clearly published its magazines in New Hampshire and that the plaintiff had forum shopped in order to find the state with the longest statute of limitations, the Court declined to dismiss the lawsuit. Forum shopping, according to the Supreme Court, was a perfectly legitimate litigation strategy. *Keeton*, however, never addressed the issue of whether venue in New Hampshire was appropriate and, therefore, whether the lawsuit should be transferred to another, more convenient forum.

49. Complaint ¶ ¶ 1 and 2.

50. Opinion dated November 18, 2010 ("Transfer Order"), at 8. Sarver stated in a later declaration that he was stationed in New Jersey when the movie was theatrically released in New Jersey but was transferred in September 2009 to Fort Campbell in Tennessee. Sarver Dec., ¶ 38. By the time he had filed his lawsuit in New Jersey in March 2010 he clearly had no connection to New Jersey.

51. Transfer Order at 8. The California court later weighed in on the appropriate forum for Sarver to have asserted as his "home forum". It observed that military personnel are not deemed to reside where they are

stationed. "They retain the domicile they had at the time of entry into the services." Opinion Granting Defendants' Motion to Strike dated October 13, 2011 at fn. 4. What then was the domicile of Sarver, a 20-year career soldier, when he brought his lawsuit in March 2010? Wisconsin, the state to which he retired in late 2011?

52. Ca. Code of Civ. Proc., § 425.16. SLAPP is an acronym for Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation. Other states have similar statutes, but they differ in their scope. For example, the anti-SLAPP law in Tennessee, where Sarver was later posted, confers immunity only on the communications to any governmental agency of information about another person "in connection with a public or governmental issue" and "regarding a matter of concern to that agency..." Tennessee Code, § 4-21-1003.

53. In contrast, a prevailing plaintiff on an anti-SLAPP motion to strike may only recover its fees if the motion to strike was "frivolous" or "solely intended to cause unnecessary delay." Interestingly, California's right of publicity statute itself provides that the "prevailing party" shall be entitled to an award of its fees, without differentiating between a prevailing plaintiff and a prevailing defendant. Ca. Civ. Code § 3344(a).

54. By stipulation between Sarver and Playboy, Sarver eventually dismissed without prejudice his claims against Playboy. Stipulation of Dismissal regarding Defendant Playboy Enterprises, Inc. filed on February 22, 2011.

55. Declaration of Todd J. Weglarz sworn to on March 14, 2011.

56. While California's anti-SLAPP law mandates a stay of discovery absent a showing of "good cause", Ca. Code of Civ. Proc. § 425.16(g), the California federal court of appeals in *Metabolife International, Inc. v. Wornick*, 264 F.2d 832 (9th Cir. 2001) held that the California anti-SLAPP law's automatic stay "collides with" the federal rule in connection with motions for summary judgment, where the taking of discovery is the "rule," not the "exception," in response to such an early, potentially dispositive motion. On that basis, the appellate court remanded the case before it to the trial court and directed that the trial court permit discovery. Nevertheless, federal trial courts in California have seemingly struggled to understand how to apply *Metabolife. Compare, e.g. Aeroplatae Corp. v. Arch Insurance Co.,* 2006 WL 3257487 (E.D. Ca. 2006)(deferring an anti-SLAPP motion to strike in order to permit the plaintiff to take discovery, where the plaintiff has had no opportunity to do so), *with, New.net v. Lavasoft,* 356 F.Supp.2d 1090 (C.D. Ca. 2004)(granting a motion to strike since plaintiff failed either to show "good cause" or to identify with sufficient particularity the discovery "essential" to oppose the defendant's motion). Thus, Sarver stated to the court that he was entitled to take discovery, while the defendants argued that an automatic stay applied. Joint Rule 26(f) Report filed on February 24, 2011 ("Joint Rule 26(f) Report").

57. Is it a difference in the style of their respective lawyers or is it an effort by Boal to distance himself from Sarver that Boal's declaration consistently refers to Sarver as "plaintiff", his title as a party in the lawsuit, and not as Sarver, let alone Sgt. Sarver? In contrast, Boal consistently refers to Boal in his sworn declaration to "Mr. Boal".

58. Boal Dec., ¶ 4.

59. Boal Dec., ¶ 7.

60. Boal Dec., ¶ 8.

61. Boal Dec., ¶ ¶ 9 and 10.

62. Boal Dec., ¶ 13.

63. Sarver Dec., ¶ 12.

64. Sarver Dec., Exh. A.

65. Sarver Dec., ¶ ¶ 13, 19 and 20.

66. Sarver Dec., ¶ 15.

67. Sarver Dec., ¶ 17.

68. Sarver Dec., ¶ 44.

69. Sarver Dec., ¶ 44c. Sarver quotes Renner as stating on the YouTube video that his characterization resulted from being shown "a guy, *there's one guy that they knew [who] was like James*..." Sarver claims that that guy is him. The YouTube video, entitled NYC Comic Con 2009, may be found at the following site:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=De4bysqDv0Y,
which was retrieved on May 14, 2012.

70. Sarver Dec., ¶ 44.

71. Sarver Dec., ¶ ¶ 44a and b.

72. Sarver Dec., ¶ 42.

73. Boal Dec., ¶ 3; Sarver Dec., ¶ 14.

74. Boal Dec., ¶ 8h; Sarver Dec., ¶ 44p.

75. Boal Dec., ¶¶ 8j and k; Sarver Dec., ¶¶ 44 r and s.

76. Boal Dec., ¶ 8m; Sarver Dec., ¶ 44u.

77. Boal Dec., ¶ 8q; Sarver Dec., ¶ 44v.

78. Boal Dec., ¶ 8aa; Sarver Dec., ¶¶ 44x and aa.

79. Historically the right of publicity is one of four types of "privacy" injuries: (1) intrusion upon a person's seclusion or private affairs, (2) the disclosure of embarrassing private facts about a person, (3) publicity which places a person in a false light, and (4) the appropriation, for the defendant's advantage, of the plaintiff's name or likeness. *See e.g.* William Prosser, *Privacy*, 48 Ca. Law

Rptr. 383 (1960). The individual states in the U.S. have slowly come to adopt in varying degrees these types of claims. Nevertheless, the individual states have not done so uniformly. For example, with respect to the fourth claim, the right of publicity, some states limit such a claim by the express terms of a legislative statute. In other states there is both a judge-made and a statutory right of publicity, with the requirements for the two differing. Some states have yet to recognize a right of publicity. Still further dividing the laws in different states is whether the right of publicity survives, and for how long, the death of the individual whose right of publicity has supposedly been misappropriated.

Wisconsin, where Boal interviewed Sarver and where Sarver now apparently resides, has enacted a "right of privacy" statute, Wisc. Stat. § 995.50. It defines an "invasion of privacy" as including the following:

> "(a) Intrusion upon the privacy of another of a nature highly offensive....in a place that a reasonable person would consider private....(b) The use, for advertising purposes or for purposes of trade, of the name, portrait or picture of any living person, without having first obtained the written consent...(c) Publicity given to a matter concerning the private life of another, of a kind highly offensive....if the defendant has acted.... unreasonably...as to whether there was a legitimate public interest...."

The statute further provides that "[o]ne whose privacy is <u>unreasonably</u> invaded" is entitled to equitable relief. Emphasis added. In contrast to California's right of publicity and anti-SLAPP laws, a prevailing plaintiff under Wisconsin's right of privacy statute is entitled to its reasonable attorney's fees, while the defendant is entitled to such an award only upon a showing that the action brought was "frivolous".

Wisconsin appears not to have enacted an anti-SLAPP law. http://www.anti-slapp.org/your-states-free-speech-protection/, which was retrieved on May 14, 2012.

80. *Carson v. Here's Johnny Portable Toilets, Inc.*, 218 USPQ 1 (6th Cir. 1983).

81. *White v. Samsung Electronics America Inc.*, 23 USPQ2d 1583 (9th Cir. 1992).

82. For example, a New York the right of publicity claim is defined by a "right of privacy" statute. That statute reads: "Any person whose name, portrait, picture or voice is used within this state for advertising purposes or for the purposes of trade without the written consent first obtained... may maintain an ...action." NY Civil Rights Law, § 51.

83. Sarver Dec., ¶ 46.

84. *Mutual Film Corp. v. Industrial Comm'n*, 236 U.S. 230 (1915).

85. *Joseph Burstyn, Inc. v. Wilson*, 343 U.S. 495 (1952).

86. *Brown v. Entertainment Merchants Association*, 564 U.S. ___(2011).

87. *Zacchini v. Scripps-Howard Broadcasting Co.*, 25 USPQ 741 (1977).

88. 17 U.S.C. § 107.

89. Ca. Civ. Code § 3344. California also recognizes a "common law" right of publicity, that is, a judicially created right. The elements required to establish a statutory right of publicity have been defined as follows: "(1) a 'knowing' use, (2) for purposes of advertising, and (3) a direct connection between the use and the commercial purpose". In contrast, a "common law" claim requires proof of the following: "' (1) the defendant's use of the plaintiff's identity; (3) the appropriation of plaintiff's name or likeness to defendant's advantage, commercially or otherwise; (3) lack of consent; and (4) resulting injury. '" *Newcombe v. Adolphe Coors Co.*, 48 USPQ2d 1190 (9th Cir. 1998).

90. *Fraley v. Facebook Inc.*, 101 USPQ2d 1348 (N.D. Ca. 2011)(unauthorized use of the name and likeness of an individual who has clicked the "Like" button to advertise on Facebook held actionable and injury found in that Facebook thereby gained additional profit from selling these "Sponsored Stories" as compared to the sale of its regular advertisements); *Cohen v. Facebook, Inc.*, 100 USPQ2d 1767 (N.D. Ca. 2011) (finding that a valid claim under California's right of publicity law has been stated by a non-celebrity for Facebook's unauthorized use of a subscriber's name and profile face to promote Facebook's Friend Finder service, subject to a showing of the subscriber's injury).

91. *Comedy III Productions, Inc. v. Gary Saderup*, 58 USPQ2d 1823 (Ca. Sup. Ct. 2001).

92. *Campbell v. Acuff-Rose Music, Inc.*, 29 USPQ2d 1961 (1994).

93. *Winter v DC Comics*, 66 USPQ2d 1954 (Ca. Sup. Ct. 2003).

94. *Kirby v Sega of America, Inc.*, 81 USPQ2d 1172 (Ca. Ct. App. 2006).

95. *Hilton v. Hallmark Cards*, 96 USPQ2d 1177 (9th Cir. 2010).

96. *Keller v Electronic Arts*, 94 USPQ2d 1130 (N.D. Ca. 2010). *Keller* is currently on appeal to the Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit, which will hear Sarver's appeal. Given the timing of the respective appeals, a decision in *Keller* will likely issue prior to a decision in *Sarver*.

97. *No Doubt v. Activision Publishing, Inc.*, 98 USPQ2d 1728 (Ca. Ct. App. 2011).

98. Nominated by President Obama, Judge Nguyen "is the first Vietnamese-American woman to serve the federal bench...[She] was born in South Vietnam. She fled from the country with her family in 1975, after the fall of the government " She was nominated by President Obama to be elevated to the Federal Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit, and her nomination was confirmed by the US Senate in early May 2012. http://judgepedia.org/index.php/

, which was retrieved on May 14, 2012.

99. Order/Referral to ADR Program, dated February 25, 2011. []

100. According to Sarver, there were "[s]ome settlement discussions" both shortly prior to and after the filing of the lawsuit but the defendants were not "interested in owning up to their responsibilities owed to Sgt. Sarver…" According to the defendants, the parties would parties would participate in settlement discussions before a private mediator but the defendants did not believe "that mediation will be effective" until after the anti-SLAPP motions were decided and that "mediation will be more effective" once the defendants had had the opportunity to depose Sarver. Joint Rule 26(f) Report.

101. Tentative Ruling dated August 4, 2011, annexed as Exhibit A to the Declaration of Todd J. Weglarz sworn to on December 19, 2011. The Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit has since held in a non-precedential decision that "consent" can be implied from a celebrity's conduct. *Jones v. Corbis Corporation*, No. 11-56082 (July 16, 2012). It is difficult, however, to equate Sarver's supposed consent to the publication of the *Playboy* article to the later production and release of the movie. Admittedly more problematic is that if Boal did indeed inform Sarver of Boal's intent to produce a movie based on that article, did Sarver's failure to object or take steps to bar its production constitute either an implicit consent or an acquiescence in that production?

102. Much of the argument focused on whether the court had correctly declined to strike the right of publicity claim. In asking the court not to strike the claim, as it declined to do in its tentative ruling, Sarver framed the argument as follows: "If you read the [*Playboy*] article and if you watch that movie, Will James is predominantly and is basically the main character in that movie and that movie is nothing more…than a movie about the life of Sergeant Sarver…" Summit Entertainment, however, framed the issue as follows: "….I don't see from the tentative [ruling] that the court engaged in an evaluation of the work as a whole at all as opposed to a comparison of the plaintiff to the fictional character…." Transcript of Proceedings on August 8, 2011.

103. Order Granting Defendants' Motion to Strike dated October 13, 2011 ("Opinion").

104. Opinion at 4-5. As previously noted, a right of publicity claim is a state-created right and, as such, differs from state to state. Moreover, courts have also differed in the test to be applied in balancing the rights of publicity and free speech, *see e.g. Rogers v. Grimaldi*, 10 USPQ2d 1825 (2d Cir. 1989) (applying a test which looks to whether the celebrity's name as applied to the title of a movie is "related" to the content of the movie and not a disguised advertisement or commercial product). Thus, the California's court's decision about which law to apply was obviously not without significance. Indeed, the decision as to what law to apply ("conflicts of law") itself differs between states. What state law would have been applied had Sarver filed his lawsuit in a state with which he had a sufficient connection to the dispute such that the court did not transfer the lawsuit to California? Would that court then have

applied that state's law and, if so, what would have been the scope of that state's right of publicity law? Would that state have had an anti-SLAPP law and, if so, would it have differed from California's anti-SLAPP law? Would the court have permitted discovery to go forward? Would the court have balanced the rights of publicity and free speech in the same way or would the court on a motion to strike, dismiss or for summary judgment reached a different result on the merits of Sarver's claims?

105. Opinion at 12. It is one of the curiosities of this and other federal court cases why federal courts have adopted wholesale the California Supreme Court's articulation of the test to be applied in balancing free speech against a right of publicity claim. Free speech is guaranteed under the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution and hence the views of federal, not state, courts should control in determining the appropriate balance to be struck. At least one federal court has expressly acknowledged that state court decisions are not binding on federal courts in determining how a state right of publicity claim is to be balanced against a federal constitutional right of free speech defense. *Hart v. Electronic Art, Inc.*, 101 USPQ 2d 1561 (D.N.J. 2011). Nevertheless, even that court cited to and applied the "transformative" test formulated by California's Supreme Court. The Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit, where Sarver's appeal is pending, has observed that it may not be bound by California's "transformative" test. Thus, it has said that it has not yet decided

"whether there is a First Amendment defense to misappropriation of the right of publicity distinct from the defense the California Supreme Court has articulated....[and] whether the First Amendment furnishes a defense to misappropriation of publicity that is broader than the transformative use or public interest defenses."

Hilton v. Hallmark Cards, 96 USPQ2d 1177 (9th Cir. 2010).

106. *See* Civil Appeals Docketing Statement dated November 10, 2011, *Sarver v. Chartier et al*, No. 11-56986 (9th Cir.).

107. *Sarver v. Chartier et al*, No. 11-56986 (9th Cir.), Order dated April 13, 2012.

108. *Sarver v. Chartier et al*, No. 11-56986 (9th Cir.), Notice of Joint Brief filed on July 24, 2012. Following the filing of the parties' briefs, there should be oral argument followed by a decision several months later.

109. Appellant's Consolidated Opening Brief on Appeal filed on July 2, 2012. Sarver made explicit what is implicit in this argument when he later argued in his reply brief: "..........[T]he transformative use test focuses on depictions of an individual and not the work as a whole." Appellant's Consolidated Reply Brief filed on September 10, 2012.

110. Appellees' Joint Answering Brief filed on August 22, 2012.

111. *The Hollywood Reporter* of October 13, 2010. http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/

hurt-locker-lawsuit-dismissed-mark-248269,
which was retrieved on May 14, 2012.

112. Motion for Leave to File Amici Curiae Brief and Amici Curiae Brief of the Motion Picture Association of America, Inc. and Entertainment Merchants Association in Support of Defendants/Appellees filed on August 29, 2012 ("MPAA Motion" and "MPAA Brief", respectively). The MPAA represents Paramount Pictures, Sony Entertainment, Twentieth Century Fox, Universal City Studios, Walt Disney and Warner Bros. The EMA represents "approximately 50,000 retain outlets around the world that sell and/or rent DVDs, computer and console video games, and digitally distributed versions of these products." MPAA Motion at 3.

113. The "unrelated to the work" test advocated by the MPAA and the EMA is the test enunciated in *Rogers v. Grimaldi*, 10 USPQ2d 1825 (2d Cir. 1989). The MPAA and the EMA also cite to the *Restatement (Third) of Unfair Competition*, § 46 which finds liability only where there has been an appropriation of the "commercial value" of a person's name or likeness "for purposes of trade". *Rogers* involved the celebrity Ginger Rogers, and the Restatement speaks in terms of the person's "commercial value". How do *Rogers* and the *Restatement*, however, apply in the case of a non-celebrity whose name or likeness has no "commercial value"?

114. *Hoffman v Capital Cities/ABC, Inc.*, 59 USPQ2d 1363 (9th Cir. 2001) (while the image of the actor Dustin Hoffman was taken from the movie *Tootsie* where he wears a red sequined gown and was superimposed instead on a Ralph Lauren designer gown, the First Amendment barred a right of publicity claim where the altered image appeared in the context of an article entitled "Grand Illusions" which depicted numerous, unaltered images of Hoffman as well as images of numerous celebrities similarly altered who wear famous designer clothing and where the article emphasizes how these celebrity images have been altered through computer software).

115. Even prior to directing her first commercially released film, *The Loveless* (1982), Bigelow's sympathy for the outsider to social norms is reflected in her apparent participation in or around 1979 (while still a film student at Columbia University) in the last interview of Nicholas Ray, Hollywood's classic director of outsiders, such as Humphrey Bogart in *In a Lonely Place* (1950) and James Dean in *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955). http://www.lafuriaumana.it/index.php/archive/52 -la-furia-umana-nd5-summer-2010/217-nicholas-ray -the-last-interview-with-kathryn-bigelow-and-fatima-parsons, which was retrieved on May 14, 20112. The interviewers of Ray questioned him about *Rebel without a Cause* and the issue of conformity.

116. The MPAA and the EMA, in fact, make that very argument in their brief, namely that filmmakers should not be required to seek such consents, which would result in the impossible of task of obtaining releases from anyone who might claim that his or her identity was misappropriated. MPAA Brief at 13.

117. For example, the traditional limitation on free speech as to its time, place and manner has continued to be applied to the Occupy Wall Street and other

such protests. In contrast, the US Supreme Court has recently taken an expansive view of the First Amendment in finding the right to spend money as itself an expression of free speech. In *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, 588 U.S. ____ , 130 S.Ct. 876 (2010) the court held that a federal law, which placed limits on the amount of money which corporations could spend on political campaigns, ran afoul of the First Amendment and hence invalidated the law. It dismissed the argument that the law, which placed limitations on corporate expenditures, furthered a sufficient governmental interest in seeking to avoid political influence and corruption through unlimited expenditures. Ironically, the traditional limitation on time, place and manner was applied to persons who were demonstrating in New York to protest the *Citizens Union* decision. *Wolfman v. French*, 12-civ-0443-LAK, as reported in the *New York Law Journal* of January 20, 2012, http://www.newyorklawjournal.com/PubArticleFriendly NY.jsp?id=1202539007592&slreturn=1, which was retrieved on May 10, 2012.

The *Citizens Union* decision has generated a great deal of controversy. For example, the Supreme Court of the state of Montana effectively declined to follow that decision in applying Montana's law which limits political contributions. The US Supreme Court in a 5-4 split opinion reversed that decision, holding that Montana's law was invalid for the reasons articulated in the *Citizens Union* decision. In contrast, the dissent argued that the Court should either reconsider the holding of *Citizens Union* or consider how to apply *Citizens Union* given the factual record before the Montana Supreme Court of possible corruption resulting from corporate expenditures. *American Tradition Partnership, Inc. v. Bullock*, 567 US ___ (1912).

118. The defendants' requests for reimbursement of their expenses can be found in the three separate motions for an award of attorney's fees filed on October 27, 2011, by defendant Summit, defendants Boal and Bigelow and by the remaining defendants. "Sources tell [*The Hollywood Reporter*] that at least some of the Hurt Locker defendants would have agreed to drop their requests for attorney fees in exchange for Sarver dropping the matter, but that he has chosen to fight." *The Hollywood Reporter* of December 8, 2011, http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/thr-esq/hurt-locker-lawsuit-jeremy-renner-jeffrey-sarver-271605, which was retrieved on June 4, 2012.

119. Order Granting in part Defendants' Motions for Attorneys' Fees dated December 8, 2011. That figure will likely rise if the appellate court affirms the trial court, including its decision awarding attorney's fees. The defendants would then presumably seek recovery of their fees in successfully defending against Sarver's appeal.

120. Sarver joined the military on October 7, 1991, and retired on October 31, 2011. Sarver 2011 Dec., ¶ 2.

121. Order Denying Plaintiff's Motion for Stay of Execution and Waiver of Bond Pending Appeal dated February 2, 2012. Such a posting, of course, would normally have required that Sarver possess some asset which the bond company could secure as collateral.

122. Sarver 2011 Dec., ¶ 5. Sarver has acknowledged that the defendants have, in fact, to date made no effort to enforce those judgments. Appellant's Consolidated Opening Brief on Appeal filed on July 2, 2012

123. *Ascentive, LLC v. Opinion Corp.*, 10-civ-04433-ILG (E.D.N.Y. 2011), quoting from a US Supreme Court opinion issued in 1922 and written by Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, which opinion, in turn, cited to an 1868 US Supreme Court opinion.

124. Ironically, Bigelow and Boal may themselves have recently experienced in the context of their next film, which is about the hunt for Osama Bin Laden, what it means to be engaged in a contest with someone of far greater capital. The Department of Justice initiated an investigation into whether Bigelow and Boal improperly obtained access to confidential documents during the course of preparing their film. *The NY Times*, January 7, 2012 at C1. http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/07/movies/film-on-bin-laden-hunt-leads-to-pentagon-investigation.html, which was retrieved on May 10, 2012.

125. DH Lawrence's *Studies in Classic American Literature*, chapter 1, which may be found at http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/LAWRENCE/dhlch01.htm, which was retrieved on May 14, 2012.

Images from the television series *Red Shoe Diaries*, with descriptions from amazon.com for each episode.
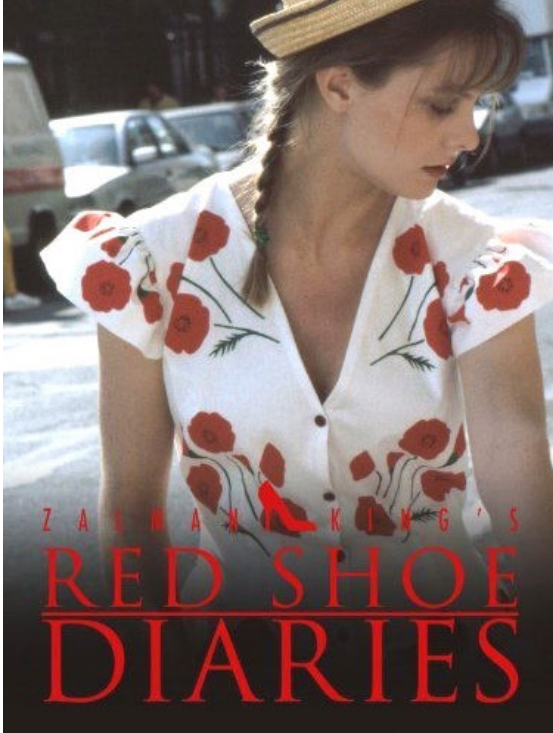
Girl on a Bike. Will is smitten when he sees Jacqueline riding her bike but she's on her way somewhere...fast. He follows on his moped in a wild, twisting, passionate cat and mouse chase through the streets of Paris and straight into each other's hearts. Dir. Lydie Callier.

# Interview with Zalman King "In defense of myself, it's not soft core"

by Peter Lehman

Introduction
by Chuck Kleinhans

Peter Lehman's interview with producer/writer/director Zalman King (1942-2012) provides new insight into the man and his work. Beginning in the 1980s, King helped establish a remarkably successful Hollywood cycle, the "erotic thriller." In 1986 *Nine ½ Weeks*, on which King executive produced and was one of the writers, became a small sensation for depicting a professional woman (Kim Basinger) who has an intense brief affair with a rough masculine guy (Mickey Rourke). A flurry of similar films followed, including *Wild Orchid, Red Shoe Diaries, Lake Consequence, Two Moon Junction,* and the extremely successful premium cable TV series, *Red Shoe Diaries* (51 episodes from 1992-1996), and *Delta of Venus*.

While not original (*Nine ½ Weeks* plays out a theme offered a decade earlier by *Last Tango in Paris*), Zalman King's body of work arrived at a key moment in the Reagan era when the "Sex Wars" and "Culture Wars" was provoking a new way of thinking about women's sexuality than the normative Second Wave feminist commonplaces. These films and the rise of cable TV softcore programming fit into a changing market and distribution niche, crossing over the narrative functions and appeal of Harlequin Romance novels (undergoing its own set of transformations with more explicit description and a wider range of characters, types, and situations). Low budget direct-to-video features, a clear cable niche for female-oriented erotic fantasy, and demographic changes created a different terrain, one that King and his collaborators fit into perfectly. Throughout this body of work a high class visual and cinematic style carefully concealed and revealed the underlying sexual imagery. Style not only created meaning, it provided the excuse for the underlying content. Porn vs. erotica? It's in the lighting.

Remarkably, some talented media studies scholars were in hot pursuit of the phenomenon and three major studies appeared in a very short period of time. David Andrews wrote *Soft in the Middle: The*
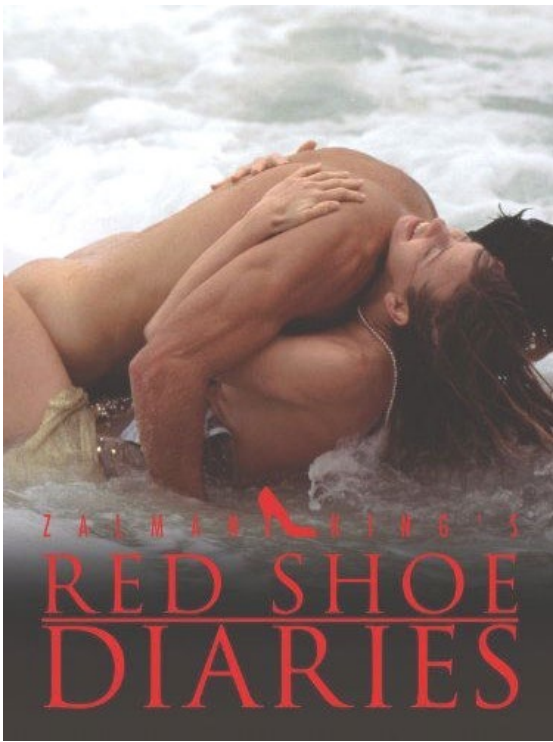
Night of Abandon. Isabelle gives an offering to Lemanja, the sea goddess, and the next thing she knows, it's Carnival and all that she had ever dreamed of comes true in one blissful night of wild abandon with a beautiful Brazilian man. Dir. Rene Manzer.
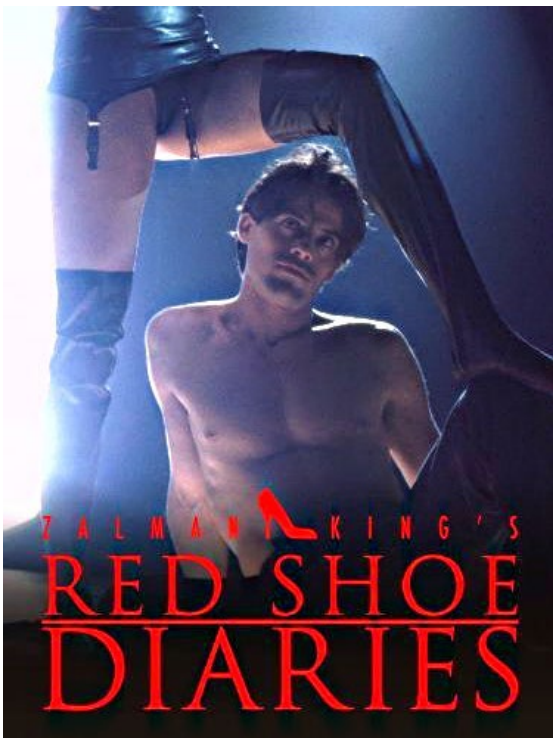
How I Met My Husband. Alice likes the idea of becoming a dominatrix, so she takes a class.

Contemporary Softcore Feature in its Contexts (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2006). With original research into the industrial aspects of the cycle, Andrews highlights how softcore managed success by being a middlebrow genre. Linda Ruth Williams looked at the cycle from a larger perspective, seeing the erotic thriller emerging from Noir patterns of the femme fatale and good-bad girl in *The Erotic Thriller in Contemporary Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005). Williams contrasts the big budget and star highlighted blockbusters such as *Basic Instinct* and *Fatal Attraction* with direct-to-video imitations often done by cross-over directors such as Gregory Dark who worked both the hardcore and softcore side of sexy cinema. Nina K. Martin's *Sexy Thrills: Undressing the Erotic Thriller* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007) continues the discussion by concentrating on the feminist tension between empowered and adventurous heroines and coopting social constraints on female heterosexuality.

In the United States sexuality remains a battlefield with whopping contradictions and crazy disparities. Todd Akin, Republican candidate for the U.S. Senate, can actually say, "If it's a legitimate rape, the female body has ways to try to shut that whole thing down." U.S. Catholic bishops go on full offensive against the Obama healthcare insurance provision that employers must include contraception in plans and the annoying fact that Catholic religious women (nuns) are ignoring commands from on high while Catholic couples almost universally disregard the ban on contraception. And the Republican Party as a whole continues its war on women's reproduction, wages, protections. At the same time, on the cultural front, the new TV season multiplies shows with gay parents and lovable queer characters, and the tawdry porn of *50 Shades of Gray* keeps it on the best seller list. Desperate attempts to control with policy are undermined by actual behavior and choices by the rank and file. Kind of like parents and teens.

Within this framework Zalman King and his immediate associates occupied an interesting place, and there's something to learn from their practice. Lehman's interview touches on what King thought his own strategy and technique was, how he regarded male actors, negotiating the MPA classification system and adjusting to radically changed technologies. Zalman King remains fascinating as a creative person passing through a specific and rapidly changing time and place in the industry and changing social facts and ideas about sexuality.

[Full disclosure: I've worked with Lehman, Andrews, and Martin as an editor; they are professional acquaintances and friends.]

During her training she meets Giuseppe and falls in love, but when she reveals her true identity, he is angry until he realizes he's in love too. Dir. Bernard Auroux.

Go to page 1 of interview

To top   Print version   JC 54   *Jump Cut* home

Zalman King died of cancer this year at the age of 70.

Zalman King.

Interview with Zalman King
"In defense of myself,
it's not soft core"

by Peter Lehman

For my friend Zalman

I met Zalman King for the first time when I went to L.A. to conduct this interview in 2006 with the intention of using it for a book I was editing for Rutgers University Press titled *Pornography: Film and Culture.* I decided not to include the interview in that book, planning to use it in another anthology I was working on at the time, which was comprised entirely of my own collected essays. I abandoned that project, however, and with it this interview fell to the back burner. Last fall I decided to update and publish it. On that note, let me go back to the beginning.

While doing my research for my interview with Zalman, I was totally surprised to discover that his first film was co-writing and executive producing an obscure Alan Rudolph film, *Roadie* (1980). I had published my book *Roy Orbison: The Invention of an Alternative Rock Masculinity* in 2003 and Orbison's contribution to the soundtrack of *Roadie* had seemed to me the overlooked turning point in his '80s comeback. After we were done talking about pornography, I was eager to ask him about Orbison. That, as the saying goes was the beginning of the end.

Our common interest in sexuality in films escalated when the subject turned to Orbison and we discovered further shared interests in country and other forms of pop music. He told me he wanted to show me some things he was working on, I cancelled my afternoon appointment with a studio executive, we had lunch and I discovered a very creative music documentary filmmaker with a fondness for figures outside the mainstream of their forms. I told him about my plans for a Roy Orbison tribute project I was developing at Arizona State University, invited him to be part of it, he expressed strong interest, and we parted sensing a mutual feeling of friendship being born. We were right.

Zalman was an incredibly generous as well as talented man. When the Roy Orbison Tribute took place in January 2008, he was there to introduce *Roadie* and to shoot a documentary about the weekend. When he had a rough cut, he invited me to sit down with him and the editor for input. When it was done, to my total surprise he asked me to take producer credit and gave the copyright of *Mercy: A Tribute to Roy Orbison* (2008) to the ASU Center for Film, Media and Popular Culture, of which I am the founding director. He then asked me whether I would help him and his wife and frequent co-screenwriter Patricia Louisianna Knop revise a screenplay they had by working an entire soundtrack of Roy Orbison's songs into it. I did and he invited me to their home for a weekend, which included a working session with me introducing them to many Orbison songs they had never heard. Zalman once asked me whether I knew why he committed himself to the Roy Orbison Tribute and I said, of course, "To honor Roy." To my surprise, he replied, "No, I did it for

A shared passion for Roy Orbison.

King got his start when he co-wrote and was executive producer for this film in 1980.

you, because of your vision and passion for the tribute." Besides being honored, I was struck by how all my interactions with Zalman were totally unaffected by his success and the world of status and celebrity of which he was a part.

From music back to movies and sexuality. While coauthoring *Lady Chatterley's Legacy in the Movies: Sex, Brains and Body Guys* (2010) Susan Hunt and I interviewed Zalman about his films in relation to the argument in the book, which both recognizes his artistry and importance, and offers an ideological critique of it. Throughout he was articulate and open and never defensive. When we came to the point when we were simply at loggerheads about fundamental sexuality issues he didn't back down or get angry. In fact, he suggested we go to a nearby club later that evening where a musician he was working on a documentary about was performing. When the book was in press he wrote a supportive blurb for the jacket and when the book came out he wrote me an enthusiastic email about how stunned he was about the analysis of *Two Moon Junction*, for which Susan Hunt gets much of the credit. He said he thought no one would ever get what he was trying to do in that movie and that meant more to him than the fact that our analysis included strong criticism! Which returns me to the beginning of this introduction.

When I decided to finally publish this interview in fall of 2011, I contacted Zalman and asked him if he would like to update it. I knew from several conversations since with him, and from new work and work-in-progress that he had shown me, and about which we had talked, that he had new ideas about some of the issues. He was happy to do so and said he was about to contact me since he wanted to do a video interview with me for a film he was making about his life. I also proposed he visit my spring semester class on Masculinity in Film to talk about *Two Moon Junction,* and that we do something on his music documentaries through my center. He simply replied, "Yes to everything." Those words were literally the last ones I would ever hear from him. I was shocked when he died on Feb. 3, 2012 such a short time after we had made all these plans. He never had a chance to update this interview but I hope this updated introduction serves an important function: to let people know that Zalman King was a serious, generous man, and a true independent artist whose work deserves more attention than it has received. Call it soft-core porn or erotica or whatever if you must categorize, but do not underestimate it. When he wrote the jacket copy for *Lady Chatterley at the Movies*, he defiantly ended with, "Long live the body guy!" – a defense of a type of character he helped create to whom Susan and I say good riddance. Our publisher understandably said they couldn't use the line and I said I was sure he'd agree to drop it, which he immediately did. He was just sincerely praising a book that substantively critiqued him while simultaneously defending himself. Long live Zalman King!

Peter Lehman
Tempe, AZ
June 5, 2012

PL: People use terms such as hard core, soft core and erotica and I'm wondering what those terms mean to you. Do you think there are important differences between those categories?

ZK: Yes. I think that pornography is a special category because it's really the prurient, for the most part, and with the prurient nature of it, it's made for a specific reason to stimulate people in a way that allows them to make their
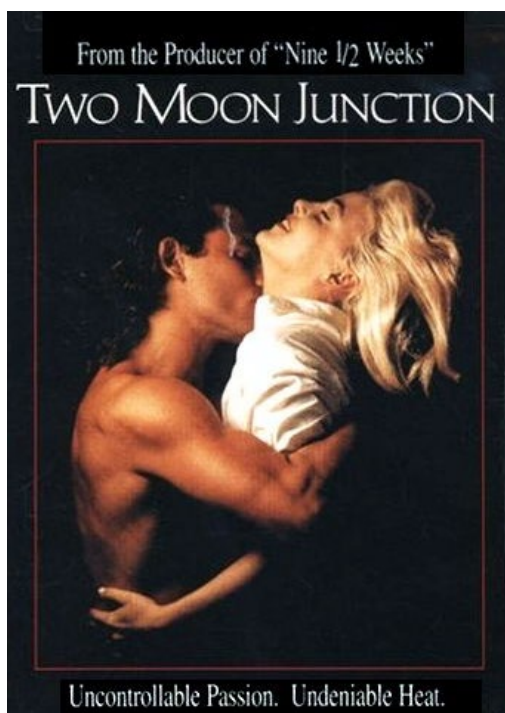
King's *Two Moon Junction* deals with a soon-to-be-married Southern belle who wants to run off with a carnival worker. In their book *Lady Chatterley's Legacy in the Movies: Sex, Brains, and Body Guys,* Peter Lehman and Susan Hunt analyze this kind of film narrative.

Richard Tyson in *Two Moon Junction*—a masculine type in U.S. culture.

fantasies real. And most pornography, and I can't say all, is not about romance. For the most part, it's just about the act of making love, it's about the act of sex. If you talk to the pornographers, I mean, it's... I'll show you some of the footage I have, because I do a lot of work, not in pornography because I don't do pornography but I'm very interested in the girls who do pornography and it's interesting to hear them talk about their typical day, which would be interesting for you to hear.

PL: I'd like to hear that.

ZK: I really dislike the title of soft core because a lot of people categorize my work as soft core, which I don't see it as. In defense of myself, it's not soft core. Soft core means soft-core pornography and that's really not what I'm interested in. Eroticism has a real place in my vocabulary personally because eroticism usually needs to move out of a relationship or some sort of tension and that's what I'm very interested in. I usually think of my work as romance, and for the most part, when I say romance you might call it romanticism, but romance would be closer to the way that I would categorize my work. Eroticism is a good word; soft core is a horrible word.

PL: When you say romance, do you think of romance novels?

ZK: No, no, not like romance novels, although there is no doubt about it, there is a certain amount of eroticism in romance novels. But I'm very interested in *Nine ½ Weeks* (1986) because I'm very interested in journeys that especially women take in terms of their sexual awakening or their erotic awakening and it's usually embracing romance and then rejecting it, which is very interesting to me.

I think of women in a journey towards sexual awakening—well, it's a very short phase in women's lives, although sometimes it continues on. When I say this awakening is a short phase, you can see its awakening in *Nine ½ Weeks* (and I use this film because it is probably the best film I've been involved with that shows this) in the seduction of the Elizabeth character (Kim Basinger). She is open for romance and the Mickey Rourke character really knows how to push her buttons of romance. In terms of what's happening in the world, for me, especially, is that most people are much more interested in their careers and eventually in having a family and other things and what happens in the film, what you see in *Nine ½ Weeks*—and what I think was the formula for success in that particular film—is that a man comes along and says "During the day we're one thing but I'm going to devote myself to romance, to our relationship, and I'm going to find ways to make it continually exciting for both of us, and we're going to find ways to make it the focus of our lives for this period of our life." And I think that's very, very seductive and attractive. I think there's a phase in men and women's lives where that's very, very important.

Nine and a Half Weeks: seduction and manipulation
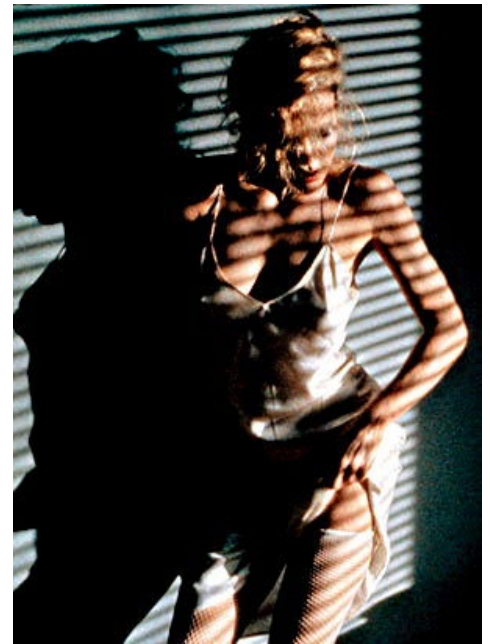
Elizabeth (Kim Bassinger) surrenders her will to a sexual relationship in *Nine and a Half Weeks*.

Nine and a Half Weeks: O'Rourke as "the guy who knows how to seduce women and not frighten them."

Kim Bassinger in *Nine and a Half Weeks*: she learns how to walk away from the relationship/addiction.

And once the Mickey Rourke character sets the hook of romance, then the hook of experimenting begins where the characters take lovemaking to another realm. Mickey blindfolds Elizabeth, they're playing little games, throwing food at each other or whatever, and the concept is, and what I have always said, in terms of the sexual awakening out of the sexual seduction of Elizabeth, is that she is becoming addicted to an easy access to an orgasm, an orgasmic condition. I think that through periods of women's lives they do become addicted to orgasms and I think once they're into that realm of excitement it's an addiction that happens, and basically, they lose themselves within it.

It's like they become a sex-addict, the same way one might become like a drug addict or a gambling addict, something like that, they want to go back to the table, they want to feel that experience again. And once that happens, it's a very, very dangerous time. It's a very dangerous time in women's lives or even in men's lives,

Elena (Audie England) in *Delta of Venus* thinks she wants romance, but discovers an alternative in sexuality.

in the fact that you lose yourself to this other person and that is what really interests me, that was the particular journey that I found particularly interesting, in terms of *Nine ½ Weeks*. And then how the Elizabeth character moved herself out of that relationship and surrendered her control, her will, herself, to this relationship or addiction, and then eventually caught herself before falling off the real edge. In the film, Mickey Rourke could have turned her out easily, turned her into a prostitute, whatever he wanted to do, but she was strong enough to fight back and basically put herself on an even keel. The other film that I did, that I directed, that I think shows some of this journey, is *Delta of Venus* (1995), which was from a collection of Anais Nin's short stories.

PL: I think it's one of your best movies.

ZK: Yes, well, *Delta of Venus* is a wonderful movie and what's wonderful about this film is that it's about a woman who's seduced and basically believes that she wants romance and doesn't even know that there's an alternative to romance and then she finds herself sexually and discovers her erotic nature.

It's 1945 and you "feel the character defiantly pushing past what's traditionally acceptable.

In *Delta of Venus*, she taunts him but it's her journey.

She doesn't go over the line with it but she dabbles with going over the line, when her lover comes back to her this person that she lamented losing, this moment in her life she's already past him and that's not what she wants with her life, and it's like the beginning. I can't say it is the beginning because that's pretentious, but it is a feminist moment. It's the beginning of a war, and it's as though she is saying "I'll take control of my life and how I derive satisfaction to me, and I don't need it from a man, I've learned through these experiences that it excites me to be able to be in charge of my own sexuality." And because it's at a time—the Second World War, maybe 1939 or 1940—it's a very exciting time for women, and Anais Nin expressed it very well. She was saying that women have fantasies. D. H. Lawrence said this, and then she said it, and I think that was very powerful. My wife Patricia and I worked on *Nine ½ Weeks* together and what was of great interest to both of us was the journey that Elizabeth was on, sexually and otherwise.

PL: I wanted to talk to you about what you just referred to as feminism. How do you see your work in terms of appealing to the female audience and the female spectator?

ZK: I feel that women have access to the work that I do and I think it is much more

powerful, it speaks much more to women—and it's meant to—than men, mainly because for some reason while I approach sexuality from a man's point of view and I think I write interesting men, the films are basically directed at women. And I do it consciously, which you can see in *Red Shoe Diaries*. The entire series was directed at women. Men watch it because it's sexy, but consistently it is about relationships and it is about women struggling with their identity and having romance. I don't know why but I do try to speak to women. I think maybe I do this because there is very little for them in terms of cinema and in terms of this "high romance."

PL: Do you have any market research, by the way, that tells you about this, both for TV shows and movies?

ZK: Yeah, for sure the TV shows are 60/40 female/male viewership, from Showtime, which is interesting and *Nine ½ Weeks* was obviously a women's film, or a couple's film, and it's basically a powerful how-to video in terms of the art of seduction. And that's what our goal was for that, mainly because I think Kim Basinger was appealing to men, much more appealing than most, and at that particular time in her life she was particularly stunning, and just because having hit the perfect sort of space in time, that's what made the film work.

PL: How do you do your casting?

ZK: The casting is very difficult because of the fact that most directors have access to an entire pool of 100%, but when you work in romantic eroticism, or in romance or in eroticism there are certain people, women and men, who don't want to do anything with it at all. They don't feel comfortable with the subject matter and they don't want to give themselves to it, and so then you're down 10% or 5% of the talent base, which leaves you constantly searching for new, brave, engaged women to be in this stuff. Sometimes it's easier and sometimes it's harder. It depends on the times, in a sense. There was a time, three or four years ago, when pornography became more inviting. Even Paris Hilton would do this sort of stuff and so a lot of people became intrigued with doing eroticism, or doing romantic pieces, but now pornography is not as in-vogue as it was. It's sort of like pornography's stuck its big toe into the mainstream for a very short window, but I think it has retreated at this point. I don't hear as much about it.

PL: Do you have certain ideals of feminine beauty that you invoke when you cast?

ZK: No, I don't, because what's beautiful to me might not be beautiful to someone else. I did a film called *Two Moon Junction* (1988) that had Sherilyn Fenn, and of course Kim Basinger is very beautiful, and Carré Otis, who did *Wild Orchid* (1990), was absolutely gorgeous, and then I've had some not-as-beautiful girls who were also absolutely phenomenal actresses. I did a move called *Wild Orchid II: Two Shades of Blue* (1991) with a young girl named Nina Siemaszko who is to me a phenomenal actress and she's beautiful, but not in a Kim Bassinger sense, not in a Sherilyn Fenn sense. Then I also did *Red Shoe Diaries: The Movie,* and the girl in that was not as beautiful as some of the others. Bridgette Balko was sort of neurotically attractive, which was what I was looking for, but she had to basically kill herself in the piece, so she couldn't be so confident with herself. Actually, Sharon Stone had committed to doing it but she was in *Basic Instinct* (1992). It would have been a much different piece with David Duchovney and Sharon Stone. Bridgette Balko's performance is very interesting in *Red Shoe Diaries,* but I wouldn't consider her a world beauty.

PL: What about the male casting? For example, what makes Micky Rourke good for this genre?

ZK: Well, nobody wanted Mickey because he was a struggle. Everyone thought he was a thug. He's a character actor, and Mickey, to me, was always beautiful, always dangerous, and always charming. There are so few people who really have charm. There are a lot of people who can act, but to be able to act and also to have charm.

Mickey Rourke and Carrie Otis in *Wild Orchid*.

Bridgette Balko in *Red Shoe Diaries: The Movie* "couldn't be so confident with herself" because she "basically had to kill herself."

Richard Tyson in *Two Moon Junction*: In a common narrative in film and literature, a body guy closely associated with the land or blue collar work awakens sexual desire in a woman married or engaged to an upper-class, highly educated professional man.

Well, Mickey's charming, and he can be very charming. It depends what day you get him on, but he's also very charismatic. He also is not frightened of women, and women can sense that, and he's an animal, I mean, he's got that animal instinct. Very few men have it and Mickey has it. When I was casting for *Nine ½ Weeks* I said, "You people are going to think I'm crazy but this is the guy I think should be in *Nine ½ Weeks*."

PL: Does the lead in *Two Moon Junction* have it?

ZK: I thought that Richard Tyson had it. Well, he had it for that particular movie. It was a different movie and I was looking for someone who was a teen idol. And he did have it in that movie, I thought. It was one of the few times that I could see his beauty, because I love the way his face looked. When I met him he was a football player and he was very beefy and drank a lot of beer. And I asked him to please lose weight and he did, and for that amount of time I thought he was very, very attractive.

PL: I think so too. Susan Hunt and I are interested in that kind of "body guy" character. He's a blue-collar worker, outside the law, in trouble with the law and possesses knowledge of what women want, and how far he can push them, and how he can satisfy them. *Two Moon Junction* is one of the classics of the "body guy" genre and one of your best movies, too. What do you think the appeal of that type of guy is for this female audience?

ZK: Richard Tyson—more than Mickey Rourke—is out of a romance novel. *Two Moon Junction* is about a wealthy girl, a debutante, a Southern belle just getting married and this carnival comes to town and there's this "Ringling" guy there… It was romance, although not much of a plot, and that's what I needed: someone who was bold and strong, and was cut and ripped, and he had charm—I don't think he was everybody's cup of tea, 100%, but I thought he fit quite well.

PL: I agree about the acting, but I mean the character. Do you know why, or have you thought about why, women respond to that type of character?

ZK: Well, yes. The characters I write are basically written to inspire women to become involved with them. It's like they found the key to the lock. Unfortunately, I don't know how to say this in a gentle way: there *are* keys to locks, if you want to play certain cards, even with very beautiful women, in my experience. Mickey Rourke, the guy knows how to seduce women and not frighten them.

You can see it watching guys who really know how to operate, I'm not talking about guys you meet in a club, I'm talking about guys who basically get the key to that lock. I have a lot of friends who are pimps, believe it or not, mainly because I film them for other stuff that I am doing and I have endless interviews with pimps talking about their strategy in terms of manipulation of women.

Images from the television series *Red Shoe Diaries*, with descriptions from amazon.com for each episode.
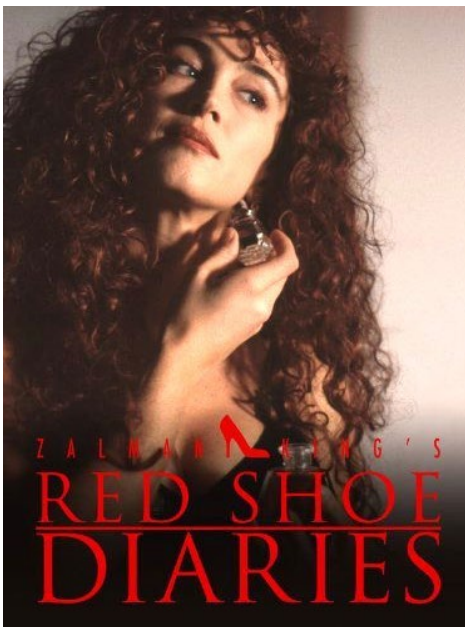
Accidents Happen. When Daria, an Italian maid, finds a tape of her employer's fantastical and explicit love making she becomes obsessed with their fantasy life until an accident brings a novel way for her to fit into the happy household. Dir. Alan Smithee (anonymous).
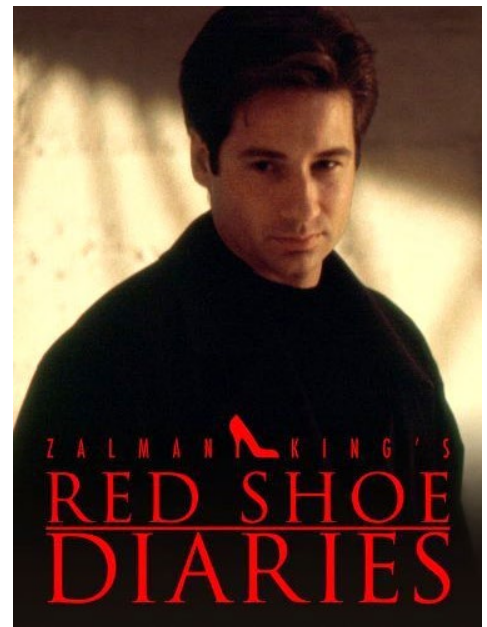
Jake's Story. Still mourning his lost love Jake is seduced by a mysterious photographer who keeps him at a distance until she finally reveals her secret, she is married. Jake knows through bitter personal experience, just how dangerous a game this can be. Dir. Michael Karbelnikoff.
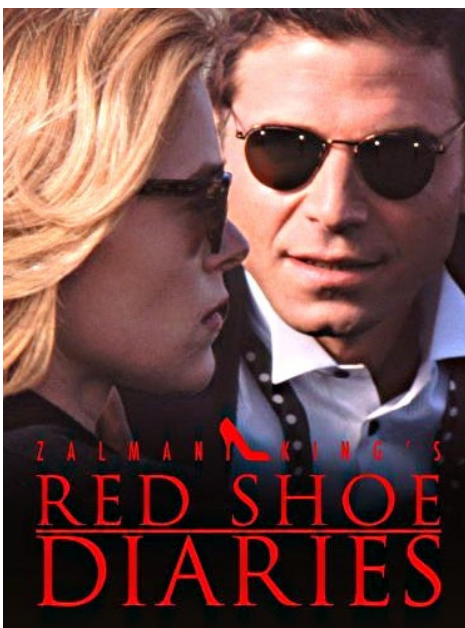
Auto Erotica. Claudia almost runs down a handsome pedestrian after working all night. She gets more than she bargains for when her phone rings and it's him challenging her to a high speed chase through the empty streets, into the desert and a new sexual awakening. Dir. Zalman King.
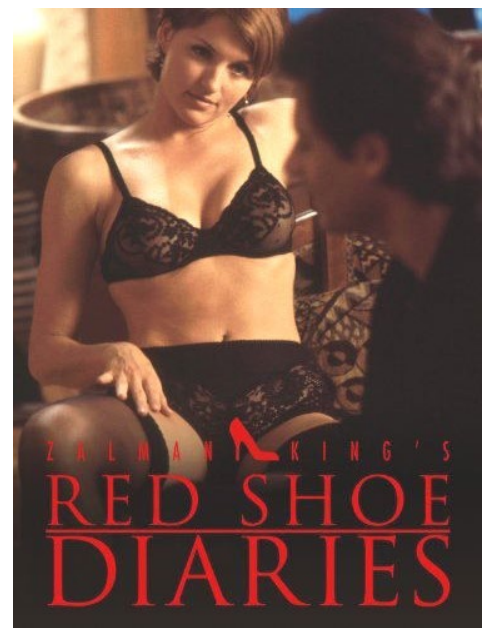
Gina. An earthquake jolts Gina from her bed, right into a new life. From her humble existence into the grandeur of a stranger's Paris apartment, it is in this apartment that Gina will find the means to reinvent her tastes and her sensuality. Dir. Rafael Eisenman.

Mickey Rourke in *Nine and a Half Weeks*: charming, not frightened of women, and with an animal instinct.

Mickey Rourke in *Wild Orchid*: he has "the key to that lock."

PL: That's exactly the question I wanted to ask you: Why is this type of character who's got the key to the lock, and is frightening in one way, attractive to the female audience of the genre?

ZK: Well, I'm the wrong person to ask, but I've seen it so blatantly happen with some of the most beautiful girls I've ever worked with. A guy will come along on the set and women will think they have it completely made and then this guy will say "Shut the fuck up, was I talking to you? Did you wash your hair today? You really should wash your hair." And then he'll go on to talk to somebody else and two days later he's in bed with her and he's got her completely.

PL: Well, that's like the guy in *Two Moon Junction*.

ZK: Yeah, he was, but it's a terrible thing to learn because you don't want to have a relationship with women like that.

PL: And you don't think your films promote that model?

ZK: Well, they shouldn't promote that model, not all my films. Some maybe, but not all. No, I'm not promoting it, but I explore it because it interests me. I think I would personally have the ability to be like that. I've been married for a very long time and it's the greatest thing that ever happened to me, but do I have Mickey Rourke in me? Absolutely. And do I want to be Mickey Rourke? No. You know, Mickey, in many ways, is still *learned*; he *plays* the character in *Nine ½ Weeks*. I'll show you. I have screen tests that show how the most attractive women in the world respond to him, the character. But it's a gift and a curse to have that kind of power.

PL: Really?

ZK: To open up, to have that, everybody would do that in their own way. It's a curse to have that. In *Nine ½ Weeks*, for instance, the overall theme for me, is the male character who has become so hardened and so manipulative—for whatever reason—and that makes him completely seductive and completely attractive. The only way he can feel is to walk through pain, so he seduces women into his world. The greatest pain would be if they killed themselves, and the second greatest pain would be if they leave him because that's how he knows he's alive, that's how he knows who he really is. And otherwise he can't feel. From my point of view that's what I'm looking at as the goal I'm going towards and that's why I get pissed off when people say my work is soft-core pornography.

PL: I don't like those terms myself.

ZK: No, I know, but if I have a chance to defend myself, I mean, soft-core people don't think this way.

PL: I've noticed a pattern in several of your films where some male characters, after they set this hook you're talking about, get involved with these female characters for very long, extended scenes with what I call
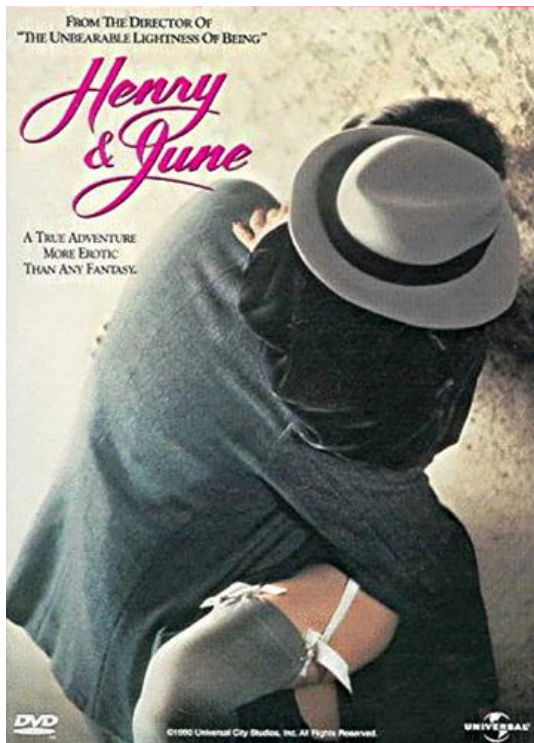
Henry and June, dir. Phillip Kaufman, feels more "literary" to King than his own movie, *Delta of Venus*.

Henry and June: Kaufman sticks more closely to the literary and biographical sources to tell the story of Henry Miller and Anais Nin.

"alternative scenarios" where there's no penetration intercourse, the emphasis is not on penetration and thrusting and that sort of thing. Then, usually, or maybe even always, there will be excessive scenes of conventional lovemaking with sweating, pounding sex. In one of the movies it comes at the end. You've got these scenarios where it's not in place at all and then usually in one or two places, it's really prominent. What do you think the attraction of that polarity is with these extended scenes where it's not about genital sex and then it is, in an extreme manner?

ZK: I think it's about wherever people are in terms of their journey. Their sexual awakening, that part of their journey, or where they are in a relationship or where they are in terms of the characters, You know, it's so interesting, because they just become really erotic scenes, really interesting scenes because the beginning is so romantic. In *Delta of Venus* she figures out he's German, and then she taunts him into fucking her in the most horrible way, but it's her character and it's her journey and it's her defiance and her challenging herself to let go. That's what interests me about porno actresses and this might be interesting to you but it's really interesting to me—these girls push past anything that we would understand conventionally.

It doesn't mean that they've changed in terms of their romantic view or being able to be manipulated—and it might come very early in their life—but there's something, and each person has his own reason but there's a certain type of freedom that comes from pushing beyond what is acceptable. Most of us live in a realm of manners, including myself, of what's acceptable, and these girls push past it in a way, and there's a freedom they seem to find past what is traditionally acceptable. You know, what they do with that freedom is another story but there is a freedom of being able to push past their sexual hang-ups. In *Delta of Venus* you felt the character, Audie England, defiantly pushing past what was traditionally acceptable. Henry Miller and Anais Nin were defying these conventions also, testing limits that they had in terms of pushing past where they were and there's a freedom in that. I'm not sure if it's a good thing or a bad thing, but there is a freedom.

PL: Do you think that in this polarity between extended scenarios where there's no genital sex and then the excessive emphasis on genital sex, the latter is at a certain place on the journey, at the end, as it is in *Delta of Venus*?

ZK: There's a time that she connects with her orgasm and there's a point where she connects with her sexuality and becomes addicted to it, the same thing that happened in *Nine ½ Weeks*, although it's less graphic.

PL: Yes, it is less graphic, but do you believe that that moment is the privileged moment, what you're calling "connecting with the orgasm"?

ZK: Yes, I think it is a privileged moment. I think it's a rite of passage in a sense, and I think people handle it in different ways and some people never experience it, I would say.

PL: Does that mean that once you've accomplished that you never go back to things like blindfolding and throwing food?

ZK: No, no, no. I mean what you hope for is that you still go on with your life and still enjoy a very healthy, satisfying sex life. I'm usually finding

people either at the beginning of the journey or the end of the journey or somewhere. What I'm looking for is the ripe fruit in the journey to celebrate the courage of these people surrendering themselves in this period of their lives to their sexuality, to their sensuality, which I think is healthy. I think people should have that. I'm trying to show a celebration of it. And it is a celebration, but you can't get back to it. For some people it might happen much later in life. Once that happens, you're not coming back to it. It can be different, you can have a whole different thing but there is a time in your life where you're genetically programmed to celebrate that aspect of your being.

PL: Are you interested in historical forms of sexually explicit materials such as literature and the Marquis de Sade?

ZK: I read a lot, but I don't necessarily read eroticism, although I have read a lot of it. Literature interests me, but I'm not interested in the Marquis de Sade, not very much. It's interesting because Philip Kaufman did a film on Henry Miller and it was an interesting film, but a much different approach than I took with Anais Nin, and he also did *Quills* (2000), which was interesting, but I find myself more literary while he's more tangibly literal, literary than I am. In Kaufman's work you can feel the source material much more than you can in mine. I think my work is much more thematically interpreted.

PL: Did the ratings board give you specific instructions of what to cut in order to receive an R rating on the *Delta of Venus*?

ZK: Well, on *Delta of Venus*, yeah, completely. When I was first doing *Nine ½ Weeks* and *Wild Orchid* I actually went and argued with them. It got to a point where I got on a plane and went to New York and had a hearing, maybe three times on different films, and basically argued the fact that I didn't mind them having a separate rating from an R rating to an NC-17 rating, but it wasn't fair then to group pornography into the NC-17 rating. The concept, I believe, was that there should be ratings, but I thought that they were lumping the NC-17 rating in with the XXX rating—there was no demarcation either—which meant, this is pornography. It is a big difference because you are losing a tremendous amount of business because certain theater chains across the country unequivocally will not accept a film with an NC-17 rating and I didn't think that was fair. I think it is fair to have ratings, I think it is fair that people should understand what they're getting into when they go to the movies, but my argument was there has to be more—you can't just say this is going to be a catch-all for anything explicit. There is a difference between *Delta of Venus* and *Wild Orchid* and *Behind the Green Door* (1972), or a Jenna Jameson movie, and I didn't think it was fair to lump them all into the same rating. Philip Kaufman made the same argument, every single time. And then I got to a
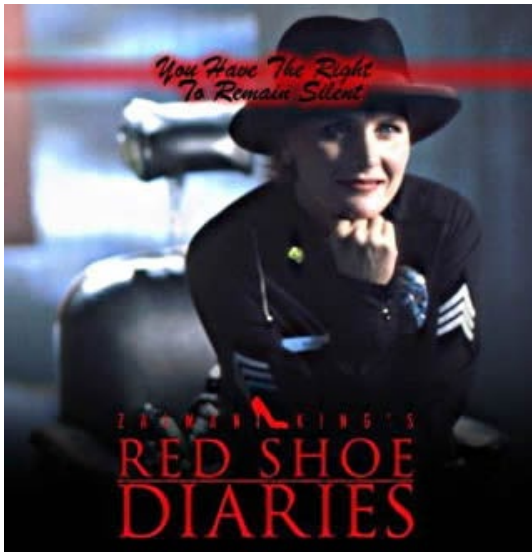
You Have the Right to Remain Silent. A policewoman, obsessive in relationships, has met her match. When he doesn't notice her, Lynn can't stand it. She arrests him and takes him to a loft where she has his complete attention, she won't let him go until he wants her. Dir. Zalman King.
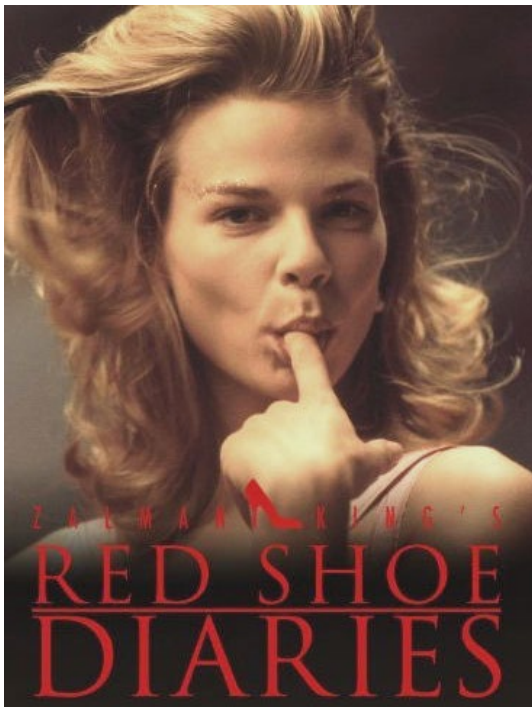
The Cake. When Juliet, an innocent housewife, goes shopping for her husband's 35th birthday cake, she meets Leonardo and her entire outlook on the meaning of a birthday cake changes forever...for Juliet actually becomes her husband's cake. Dir. Brian Grant.

point where, basically, I probably spent more time with ratings than most people because it becomes arbitrary. *Delta of Venus*, yeah, there was a huge difference between the NC-17 and the R. And at a certain point, you just give up because you can't beat them.

PL: When did they tell you what to do and how did they tell you?

ZK: They'll say, there's too much thrusting in so-and-so and so-and-so, or they won't tell you specifically but sometimes they'll go back six or seven or eight times before they'll finally get where we're going. And it's expensive, and it's arbitrary.

PL: What's acceptable for an R rating or what's not acceptable? Do you have an idea in mind now when you're going to make a movie about what is unacceptable for the R rating?

ZK: Well, you know, sometimes I do very sexy stuff, I mean really sexy stuff and it wouldn't be accepted for an R rating, but I'm glad that I can also do an R film because I think that a lot of my stories are very, very attractive, even without the sexuality. So I'm glad that I have a form that I can get into Wal-Mart or Blockbuster or whatever the hell it is.

PL: What's not acceptable?

ZK: I don't know. It's very specific. I guess if you see a man with an erection in a film, which would go into NC-17 because it's very shocking for some people. You know, if a man were going down on a woman and we actually saw all of that, that would probably be too much, so you would give the indication of what was going on but then not see it. I just wrote a film about a guy and there is a scene where he stands up and takes his pants off and takes his cock in his hands and says, "Is this what you want? Is this what you want?" Well, I had to put a note in front of it in the script that said this would be indicated but not seen because you don't want the actor to think that he's going to have his cock in his hand, but there's no other way to describe what he's doing.

You know, studios have a lot of power and the studios just go to the ratings board with a lot of volume, they make the case we've got hundreds of millions of dollars or fifty million dollars in this. Then this little guy comes along and if they can beat anybody up they can beat us up. I don't even think that it's a corrupt system, don't get me wrong, but I think you can lobby much harder if you are a studio. They have people who are paid just for that, to look out for their interest in every area. They have to; it's a big investment that they have.
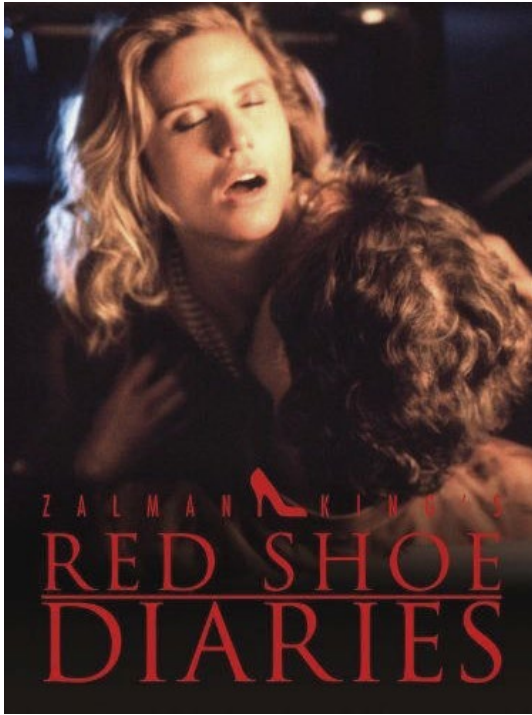
Double Dare. A married woman carries on a game of dare or be dared with a handsome businessman she's never really met via fax, but as the stakes get higher how far will she go before she's actually cheating on her husband? Dir. Rafael Eisenman.
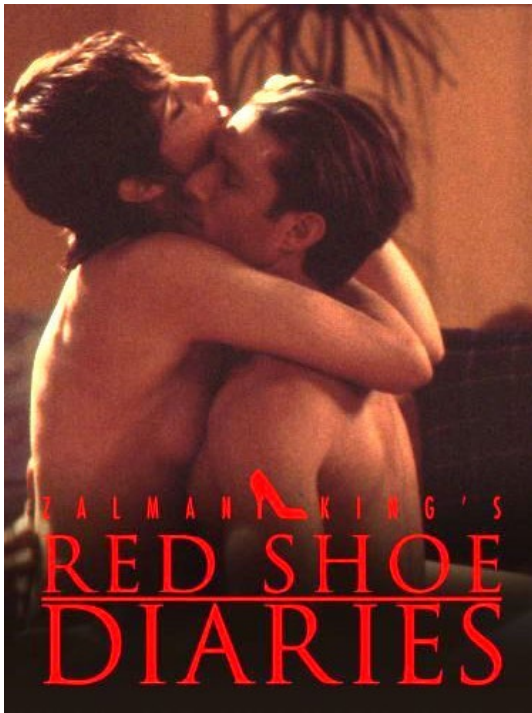
Liar's Tale. Corey, a burnt out photojournalist

PL: I know it's not a clear cut ratings issue, but explain your attitude toward the male body since you just gave that example. The only image of the penis I remember in your films is when Sherilyn Fenn looks through a hole in the shower in *Two Moon Junction* and you see one of the guys showering. What is your attitude about showing the male body? Do you believe your audience doesn't want to see the penis represented?

ZK: I don't believe that anymore, but I used to. I do show it sometimes, it depends who the actors are. You definitely see it in European films a lot. You do see it in a lot of my films, you just haven't seen them all. I think that feelings surrounding this have changed and that now, women basically are almost demanding it. From 1980 to now, women are much more aggressive about what they want to see and I think they are much more comfortable looking at erotica. I think that's what's sliding off from the porn industry. I think a lot of girls grow up watching porn, for one reason or another, so they're much more used to it. That's what I'm saying, there was a peak, and I have a feeling that now it's diminishing. I don't know why. I have been doing a lot of other things so I haven't been around it, in the same way that I usually am, but I think it is diminishing to a certain extent. I think it's moving back. Some people say it's political or what have you, and I think kids are becoming more conservative, generally.

PL: You said it depends on the actor and some actors will do it and some won't? Is that something you discuss with them?

ZK: Yeah, exactly. I usually write specifically what I'm intending to see because I don't want people to be surprised at what the role entails. I'll never seduce anyone into doing what they don't want to do. Basically I say, "This is what I intend to see, if you're not comfortable with it, you really shouldn't do the movie." So if I want to see male nudity, it's not negotiable. If a guy says, "I'll do your film but I don't want to do nudity," that's when we negotiate. I don't wait until "Now, baby, come over here and let me talk to you." I never do that. Because you have to have trust and it has to be about the drama we are doing or trying to do, it has to be a film that becomes something, you know, that's the Holy Grail for the time being.

PL: Set design seems to play a really important role in eroticism in your mind.

ZK: Yeah, well, that to me is eroticism, there are all different kinds, but for me it's lifestyle, especially when you're trying to appeal to women for the most part. Set design is interesting to me and it means a lot to me. It's about the sensuality. I like dirty sex too, but it's a whole different thing. It's just something that's second nature to me, something I like, it's life. In a certain sense, what you're trying to do is seduce the audience and I know that in some of my films, it's the style that makes the film acceptable to many. In films such as *Nine ½ Weeks,* and probably *Two Moon Junction*, it's the style of the film that makes this type of sex okay and allows some people to sit and watch it and see it and accept it in another kind of way. And it's amazing because so many of the ads now are rip offs of the stuff that I did in my films, which is fashions' way of a compliment. I would see a lot of images or parts of images that came out of my films, especially when *Nine ½ Weeks* and *Two Moon Junction* came out.

PL: Can you discuss with me the influence of working with your wife, Patricia? How does that affect your stories, your characters, and your

visuals?

ZK: Well, my wife is a phenomenal writer and she's also a sculptor and she's really accomplished and just adorable. Patricia has a very humane point of view and she's the last person you would expect to write eroticism. She's very attractive and sexy to me, but she's so non-erotic and so the last person on the planet that would write eroticism.

PL: How does that affect you?

ZK: Well, it affects me in different ways. She writes beautifully although we used to write from different points of view. *Two Moon Junction* I wrote by myself, and she has been involved in many of the films that I've done which she hasn't written and many that she did write. It's a real back and forth, with my stuff and hers. I don't know really how to explain it. It's not that she's soft or anything, she's not soft as a writer. It is a good collaboration between the two of us.

PL: You were trying to reach the female audience before you started writing with her, so she's not the only reason, but do you think she has helped you reach the female audience?

ZK: No, I don't think Pat thinks about eroticism. I think she thinks more along the lines of "this is a really good story and this is how it should be told." It's weird because we live a very—well, I can't say we live a normal life, because we don't—but eroticism is not a prime thing in the way that we live. I mean, we're not swingers. It's more about romance; I think we're very romantically inclined. This is a hard question to answer—she's just a really good writer and really talented. If she was writing eroticism or Andrew Lloyd Weber music, or if she were writing for Striesand, she could do it. She's talented like that. She's written for lots and lots of other actresses. She has a play that's opening in New York today. She was involved in called *Milwaukee Minnesota*, which is a very small town. She writes all kinds of things. Pat's worldly and I think that her worldliness and sophistication is very helpful to me.

PL: How do you work with other people to get them to replicate your style and aesthetic when you're doing a series? There are some names that pop up such as David Saunders.

ZK: Yeah, yeah, he started as my producer for *Wild Orchid*. I thought he was really talented and I brought him along because I needed other directors and we were doing *Red Shoe Diaries* with around 50 episodes. I needed him as a director and so it was great for me because he adapted really well. I also use very young DPs [director of photography] always, and because I turned into a DP myself and eventually even established a style. The style I developed is a style that we used with long runs on *Red Shoe Diaries* because we had a very small space. You know, certain styles are dictated by where you are and what you're doing. I watch the scenes very carefully and I edit. I'm in the editing room anyway, so I edit. It becomes a collaboration, even though they're directing and they do a very good job. It's not like they were directing—it's still my football

PL: Exactly. But isn't it hard to find people like that with whom to work?

ZK: Initially it is hard. Rophie is very talented on his own, I wouldn't diminish him in any way, shape, or form, but he wasn't when he started, he wasn't as talented when he started, but he moved into it.

PL: Could you tell me briefly what the organization of your company is and how it operates?

ZK: Sure. I have a company. We do all sorts of things; we just did a reality series on Bravo. We do everything, all kinds of stuff. I have a whole other line of stuff that I do which is sort of bad boy stuff, which is not for women at all. When I say bad boy stuff, I have the idea of something, which is for a completely different sensibility, which I'll show you, and it's bad boy. It's called *Whiplash* now but it was called *Sex YZ*, it's sort of a collection. I film all of the time, anything really, from extreme sports to beautiful women, comedy or stupid stuff. Some of the craziest shit you've ever seen in your life is on my camera.

PL: How do you determine the budget for certain projects?

ZK: Well, my world has changed so much because the technology has changed so much. All that stuff you saw downstairs, that's all I need, basically just the high def camera. I shoot by myself. Literally by myself, all by myself, no sound man. I have a producer who goes with me because it gets complicated in terms of the logistics. I mean there is such a thing as a budget, but the paradigm has changed, my business model has changed so completely. Where I used to need a crew of 100 or 70, or 50, now I need a crew of 10 or 12 and you'll see the same exact movie.

PL: How do you decide if you are going to develop a project for a movie or for Showtime or for cable or for television?

ZK: I was away from movies for some time. I write all the time for movies, but I got involved in other stuff for whatever reason and I had a lot of fun, but when I went back to film I sort of had to start from the very beginning again. I had to change. This is a very difficult thing to explain, but there was a business model and we all became comfortable with a way of doing things, but then three years ago I realized they came out with a really lightweight camera, and I had to start thinking about new and different ways of doing this. Panasonic came out with the 24 P camera and I really liked it, so I started to shoot with it and realized that I can shoot anything with it and I can make it fantastic. And I didn't need a dolly, I didn't need cranes, I didn't need a sound man, I didn't need anything. I could do it, I could go out and if I wanted to shoot a feature, literally, I could shoot it by myself. Once I realized all the potential, I became really enamored with it. So maybe I shoot three or four days a week while I'm writing and it is very fulfilling for me.

I basically shot the series *Forty Deuce* by myself. It's a TV show and there's no crew, nothing. You can't get mad at anybody, everything is your own thing, and so now I do the features that way and I'm really confident with it. I have a feeling that my features will be fantastic. I won't only shoot myself; on theatrical features it will depend. On a musical, if it's a really big musical, then I'll shoot a camera but I'll bring a cameraman in because it's choreographed. If it's a big movie I'm still going to do it very inexpensively, unbelievably. I could do the same movie someone else might for less. Like my friend Stephen Goldblatt who's a DP just shot *Angels in America* (2003), and he's doing *Rent* (2005), so I had to meet him. I had dinner with him last night, and he said, "I can hardly do this." I said, "What's the matter, Stephen?" and he said "I only have 68 million dollars to do *Rent*!" I said, "Wow!" And after I said, "Steven, I don't know what you're talking about," he said, "What? I can't, I need to use a techno crane, 50 footer, and there are only three or four bricks, I can't afford it."

And I'm thinking, do it different. That's the concept, it's just making your mind think a different way, and you can do it. Robert Rodríguez is doing it, but even *Sin City* is an expensive film. I just think if you can take the same talent, but try new things you can have such freedom to do better films.

Mezipatra Queer Film Festival that tours Prague, Brno and other cities in the Czech Republic. One of the few queer film festivals in the former East Bloc that has kept an annual presence since its beginning, but not without occasional skirmishes with municipal councilors. The bullet holes are a part of the poster, which represents and anticipates a target.

On the production of heterotopia, and other spaces, in and around lesbian and gay film festivals

by Ger Zielinski

While lesbian and gay film festivals[1] [open endnotes in new window] have spread unevenly around the world since the late 1970s,[2] the very idea of such a festival taking place in any given city can prompt a wide range of responses, from polite liberal indifference to brutal reactionary violence. In this article I mobilize Foucault's concept of *heterotopia* as a type of probe, heuristic in part, to open up the complexity of what a festival may be but also, more specifically, to determine how sexual identity and community mark and distinguish such festivals from others. The term *heterotopia* itself has no connection to sexuality *per se*. Rather it is intended to capture the sense of those radically heterogeneous spaces, spaces of difference that lay figuratively and sometimes literally at the edges of society, its built spaces and its norms, as discussed in more detail below. Furthermore, in this paper, I argue in favor of an articulation of the unique space of the lesbian and gay film and video festival through Foucault's heterotopia and suggest a felicitous relation to gay space and the act of queering space. Without doubt, any type of festival may be studied through the heterotopic notion of space; however lesbian and gay film festivals set themselves off from the rest on account of their unique theme and constellation of issues. While a few scholars have mentioned the relation between heterotopia and film festivals (e.g. Stringer, 31), none has worked the concept through any particular type.

It is no secret that these festivals, among others, have become important cultural and economic features in most cities in the world,[3] as each city individually chases the tourist dollar and follows the optimistic recipe for becoming a "creative" or "global" city. Until the early 1990s, however, many distributors and filmmakers shunned lesbian and gay film festivals in fear that such association would work against their careers. The early 1990s brought a wave of exciting films that were grouped under the rubric of the "new queer cinema," which were in part celebrated for their capacity to appeal to audiences beyond the LGBT community as a "crossover" film.[4] The 1990s also brought with it the rise of the gay niche or pink dollar that was aggressively courted by marketers in North America, Australia and Western Europe. Until this period of transition in the 1990s, the stigma of the festivals was to be avoided at all costs.[5]
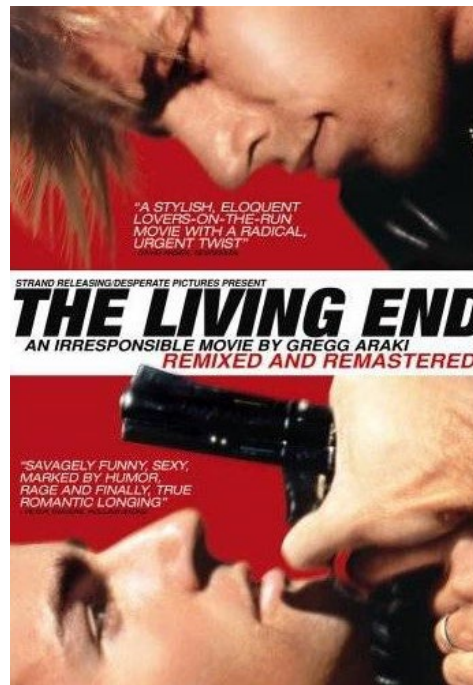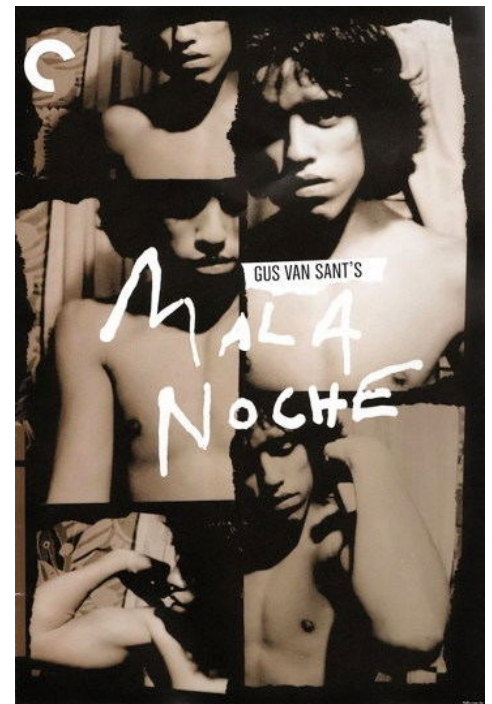

Miami Gay and Lesbian Film Festival is held in the city of Miami Beach (facing mainland Miami) in and among the historic, festive Art Deco district of South Beach. The festival is particularly attentive to the history and struggle for LGBT rights in the "sunshine state" of Florida. Films critical of anti-gay crusader and Floridan Anita Bryant are particularly well received.

1992 Sundance success: New Queer Cinema. The late 1980s and early 1990s brought the emergence of films we call the New Queer Cinema, a trend of abrasive, sexually defiant films. Araki's *Living End* made it into Sundance in 1992.

Gus van Sant's early film *Mala Noche* was precocious and bravely anticipated the trend. It went on to win prizes at Torino's gay and lesbian film festival in 1988, another prize from the Los Angeles Critics' Association the year before.

Merlinka - named after a famous Belgrade drag queen, this festival struggles annually.

Let's now turn to Foucault's heterotopia and work through the six characteristics as they apply to LGBT film festivals, with consideration of what pressing questions they might pose. The application of Foucault's concept of heterotopia to LGBT film festivals contributes significantly to a deeper understanding of the festivals themselves as events. Written in 1967, the essay *Des Espaces autres* (translated as *Of Other Spaces: Heterotopias,* 1986)[6] falls into Foucault's early period, before the pivotal May 1968, and serves as a snapshot of Foucault's intellectual concerns and positions. Specifically, here his concept of heterotopia may be situated in dialogue with other French philosophers of the time, such as Gaston Bachelard, Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau and Guy Debord, among others. The term *heterotopia* (and its cognate *heterotopology*) itself in English is a neologism from the French *hétérotopie*, distinguishing itself from *utopie* and etymologically stemming from the Ancient Greek *heteros* (other or different) and *topos* (place). Similarly, Lefebvre coined *isotopia*; de Certeau has his *heterology*. All of these take *utopia* as their model neologism and aim to supplement or exceed it. As it is commonly known, *utopia* has its own deliberate ambivalent etymology, as sketched by Thomas More from the Ancient Greek, namely *ou–topia* (*outopeía*) for no place or nowhere, as well as *eu–topia* (*eutopeía*) for beautiful or good place. [7] It is from the translation into Latin that the Greek prefixes are reduced to the single 'u,' thereby setting the two possible meanings and places into tension in the single word.

Leading up to his concept of heterotopia, Foucault sketches a brief history of concepts of space according to specific historical epochs. The highly hierarchical medieval space is that of emplacement, which Galileo dissolved when he posited the scandalous "infinitely open space" or extension. In contrast to the 19th century and its emphasis on history and time, our epoch considers space through the concept of the site. Briefly, general concepts of space in the West, then, have moved from the Medieval 'emplacement' to Renaissance 'extension' to 19th century 'teleological history' to the modern 'site.' Foucault defines the site through "relations of proximity between points or elements," e.g. series, grids or trees (23). He states that

"space takes for us the form of relations among sites" (23).

Unlike time, Foucault claims that "contemporary space is perhaps still not entirely desanctified," but still carries with it the oppositions of private and public space, family and social space, cultural and useful space, as well as leisure and work space. According to Foucault, the constancy of those oppositions hints at the hidden presence of the sacred. The contemporary space of sites for Foucault is strongly *heterogeneous*, not an infinite homogenous void waiting to be filled.

Between utopia and heterotopia, Foucault positions the figure of the mirror. The hybrid experience of the mirror is both utopic and heterotopic. Its utopic aspect as a "placeless place" enables the subject to see herself in a place where she is not; but it also has a heterotopic aspect in as much as the mirror exists in reality. Foucault writes,

> "The mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there" (24).

Foucault is strictly using the mirror here as a figure, an illustration, and should not be confused with French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's theory of the mirror stage in human development (cf. Lacan 1977).[8]

Heterotopia richly articulates the space of the cultural formation of the lesbian and gay film festival. Foucault's mirror posits a utopic placelessness, an ideal beautiful place. The figure of the mirror, which I am taking here as a institutional metaphor, resonates well with the experience of community-oriented lesbian and gay film festivals. There viewers experience a similar play of presence and absence at any community-designated event, specifically in the screenings, waiting in line, and so forth, through the fleeting mechanisms of recognition of resemblances, empathy, identification, repulsion, disidentification, and so on. Moreover, the films, as selected and sequenced into programs, and notion(s) of community underlying the festival itself, together produce complicated experiential chains of familiarity and difference, according to such categories as habitus, gender, class, race, ethnicity, and sexual identification. In short, the festival itself takes place as an event with a limited duration across a constellation of sites and festival-goers that actively produce and perform this heterotopic space.

Foucault lays out six general principles that together constitute his theory of heterotopia:

1.

Heterotopias can be found in every culture, in a sense expressing the culture's utopian impulse by creating these "other spaces" and imposing them; they have two general categories: the crisis and the deviant (24 f.). (a) Crisis heterotopias are reserved for individuals in a state of crisis in relation to the ground of society, e.g. rites of passage for adolescents, the aged, pregnant women. (b) Deviant heterotopias are "those in which individuals, whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm, are placed," e.g. psychiatric wards, prisons, and even retirement homes.

One could say that, historically, the origin of lesbian and gay film festivals stems from a culture of sexual deviation or deviance, within the larger context of gay liberation and lesbian feminism, both certainly contestations of various societal norms and laws regarding sexuality, gender, the private-public divide, among others.[9] Moreover, LGBT community action has developed its own institutions of crisis and heterotopias within the larger deviant, queer[10] framework, such as formal community center, as well as the refuge spaces of the bar, club, bathhouse,

Merlinka rainbow pieta. The intended meaning of the international rainbow motif, a shibboleth of sorts, might be invisible to those outside of the LGBT scenes. Alternatively, if understood, the poster might incite vitriolic charges from the social and religious right in Serbia.

Ljubljana (in Slovenia, formerly Yugoslavia) holds the longest running LGBT film festival in Europe. In Communist Yugoslavia the city of Ljubljana was a gay destination. A northern city with very liberal mores, out of which grew the festival itself. Since the capitalist turn liberal culture, including the festival, had to contend through the 1990s with growing parochialism and macho-defensive nationalism.

San Francisco Lesbian and Gay Film Festival, the world's longest running since 1976 with a program of super-8 films by local filmmakers, who spent a lot of time milling about Harvey Milk's camera shop where they had their films developed.

and nighttime cruising parks, coming out groups, shelters for youth, to name a few resilient practices.

The vibrant cultural space of the carnival, according to Bakhtin, offers the possibility of social unruliness and limited rebellion but always within the constraints set by some larger authority that permits it to take place.[11] Important to note is the concessionary aspect of the act of permission on the part of the state. The carnival as event does not simply happen but is granted permission by some higher authority. What does it mean when permission is denied or revoked in the case of certain lesbian and gay film festivals? Such film festivals everywhere have unruly pasts, faced protests from religious and populist rightwing political groups, and had their public funding threatened at the whim of municipal, regional or national politicians and granting agencies. While these actions usually remain within the public sphere's basic accepted rules of conduct, other actions against the festivals move beyond such rules.

Responses to particular festivals around the world can and have been remarkably more severe, as the process of globalization continues (Appadurai 1990; Binnie 2004). In 1997, for example, the South Korean military intervened to restrain the opening of the first Seoul Queer Film and Video Festival on the Yonsei University campus (Kim 1998). Soyoung Kim suggests that, in view of having been shamed in the eyes of the Western media, South Korean authorities reversed their decision later and allowed this festival, among others, to take place subsequently without incident in order to save face as a nation seeking positive international recognition on the world stage. Since then, the festival has operated without major incident (Kim 2007).

Q! is a highly successful queer film festival, based in Jakarta but tours to other large cities throughout Indonesia.

Seoul 1998. While the 1997 edition of the festival, its first, was closed by the military before it could open, subsequent festivals in Seoul have continued.

Much more brutal attempts to quash such festivals have occurred more recently, particularly the 2008 first editions of the Queer Sarajevo Festival in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Merlinka in Belgrade, Serbia, as well as the "Bok o Bok"

(translated as "Side by Side" in English) Lesbian and Gay Film Festival in Saint Petersburg, Russia.

Intended as an arts festival, Belgrade Queer Festival was shut down due to threats of brutality and lack of any police guarantee of security for those attending.

Police assembled in Belgrade to protect local pride parade from neo-Nazi skinheads. Such police presence is a part of Serbia's bid to join the European Union. Right-wing detractors critical of this bid refer to such actions as "Euro-sodomy."

Sarajevo Queer Film Festival poster

Brutal protests at the opening evening of the Sarajevo Queer Film Festival

John Greyson's *Covered* was a poetic response to filmmaker's witnessing of the attacks himself. Click here to see *Covered* on Vimeo.

In the Sarajevo case, the festival was imprudently scheduled to take place during Ramadan and extensively vilified in the local press as a foreign perversion (Kajinic 2010; Beneteau 2008). Both local and foreign organizers were beaten by angry men with clubs, chanting religious phrases and homophobic insults, as these violent protestors forced their way through the police line into the opening screening. Two documentary films were made on the event: the complex, layered *Covered* (2009) by Canadian filmmaker John Greyson who was present as an invited guest and the second, *Queer Sarajevo Festival 2008* (2009) by Cazim Dervisevic and Masa Hilcisin, filmmakers associated with the festival based in Sarajevo. The festival has not yet taken place. Curiously, under similar threats and before it was scheduled to open, the Merlinka International Queer Film Festival in Belgrade in 2008 was canceled, however subsequent editions have been held successfully there. Those countries aiming to join the European Union have to meet certain standards of human rights as specified in the EU's constitution, which includes anti-discriminatory clauses for LGBT rights. The rightwing of such countries name the situation "euro-sodomy" (e.g. Kulpa 2011; Kajinic 2010), and this also applies to many of the new republics formed after the disintegration of Yugoslavia.

Go to page 2

St. Petersburg's Bok o Bok (Russia) has become rather successful traveling to various provincial capitals in Russia, but survives continuing municipal-level interference from conservative politicians and religious leaders.

Bok o Bok's posters, among all other posters, may no longer use any word that indicates homosexuality. Any such explicit reference is now against the law in the city of St Petersburg.

In the Russian case, while the local press similarly vilified the idea of a festival organized around categories of sexuality, state action was anonymous and centered on refusing permits or inventing fire regulation problems at the last minute to close the venues (Tsiokos 2008). Simply put, the state participated in outright obstructionism. Curiously, the situation compelled the organizers to reinvent the Soviet period's practice of *samizdat,* or secret clandestine communication and gatherings, in order to hold screenings. Messages and texts (SMS) were relayed by a cellphone network of trusted contacts each time an improvised venue had been secured.[13] [open endnotes in new window]

The following year, festival organizers circumvented this Kafkaesque situation (Rabatzky 2008; de Guerre 2011). Instead of trying to use city-owned venues, they held all events on the property of various foreign consulates and cultural agencies. Apparently, the event was a great success. By choosing consulates as sites, the municipal authorities could no longer play the game of rendering the building unfit for an event. Now the festival tours provincial Russian towns, such as Novosibirsk and Archangel, among others, where the organizers still encounter similar resistance from certain members of the local authorities and the press.

While the network of LGBT film festivals has reached truly an international scale, with regular festivals not only in North America and Europe, but also in Asia and increasingly in Eastern Europe and India, there are hardly any such events in Africa or the Middle East.[14] Evidently, both the density and paucity of such festivals around the world deserves serious consideration. In North America in the 1970s, the work of the lesbian and gay rights movement was accompanied by the development of the festivals as a part of a larger media activism, whereas in Africa and the Middle East homosexuality itself as an identity remains under suspicion. [15] What is common in the development of the festivals worldwide is their local contingency, their adaptation to their contexts of emergence, their social struggles, debates, nationalisms, taboos, idea of sexual representation.[16] Precisely how they manifest themselves in these diverse locations, each with its own contingent constellation of races, ethnicities, social classes and local sexual histories, is difficult to predict.[17]

I wonder, will the queer film festival always carry with it the promise of a site for the unruly carnivalesque anywhere in the world? While the customary frame of the carnival or festival guarantees a space for free play, the accented theme on minor sexualities and consequent transgression of the private-public binary seems to ensure that lesbian and gay film festivals face conflict somewhere. Their unique festivality[18] centered on sexual identities may be denied in certain places, provoking contestation.

2.

Heterotopias admit the possibility of history and change (25). Festivals and carnivals have similarly transformed from ancient through modern times, fracturing into an endless myriad of secular types. In recent times in the United States, for example, we see the bifurcation from 'film festival' to 'film and video festival' alongside 'women's film festivals' and 'black film festivals' to 'gay film or video festivals' to 'lesbian and gay film and video festivals' to the embracive 'LGBTTQ film and video festival' (the common acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Transsexual, and Queer). At the heart of this trajectory in the United States has been the development of liberal civil rights, sexual and gender identity politics, and a broad ethics of inclusion and social themes trumping medium specificity in the way these festivals are organized.

San Francisco Women's Film Festival (The first WFF was in Ann Arbor in 1972)

American Indian Film Festival, since the mid 1970s, is one of the early festivals that emerged out of the social movements of the time, including civil rights and women's liberation

Newark Black Film Festival, the longest running in the USA.

While festivals do change in their programming priorities, structure, organizational identity, among others, what will be the next incarnation of this sort of (film) festival? For example, will the festival be able to accommodate adequately transgender and transsexual concerns; should separate festivals serve the trans community; or should both somehow be attempted?[19] How interested are transgender and transsexual persons in associating with such a festival? How will issues of ableism and ageism work their way through their special liberal logic of inclusion? These questions are ongoing. They could arguably be considered a part of what Thomas Elsaesser calls the potential of festivals to serve as an *agora* (2005, 103), borrowed from the Ancient Greek city state notion of a public gathering place or forum. In this sense, a festival fosters a context, a space for conversations, discussions and heated debates over issues that matter to its publics. Just as the cases mentioned above provide excellent examples of how such identity-oriented festivals put agora in practice—enhanced or thwarted—international film festivals in general have a long history of providing contexts for protests or launching manifestos, whether the 1968 closing of Cannes or the 1962 manifesto at Oberhausen, among many others.

3.

According to Foucault,

Any type of festival that has some claim to community will be a ripe ground for contestation. *The Gendercator* by Catherine Crouch caused a stir the year it screened (or was pulled) from various festivals. If framed correctly, a festival can provide a superb "agora" for those interested in discussing issues that matter to them.

Zagreb, Croatia (former Yugoslavia), has its own annual queer arts festival.

The sole in all of Africa, Out In Africa is South

"the heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible" (25).

This principle brings out the sense of differences—the "hetero"—at the heart of the concept. He adds more about the concept of space, specifically about film screenings:

"[The] cinema is a very odd rectangular room, at the end of which, on a two-dimensional screen, one sees the projection of a three-dimensional space" (25).

However, this concept of space does not simply imply a static projection of three-dimensional space but rather a sequence in time. I would elaborate further that screen space generally opens up an infinity of possible spaces and temporalities that we juxtapose against the rest of the room of the cinema. The room of the cinema invites a space of curiosity and promise, with expectations of adventure, fantasy, familiarity and difference, even a Benjaminian anticipation of shock. Cinemas produce their own sort of signature, particularly by dint of what they show. The festivals that temporarily inhabit and animate these physical spaces of the cinemas layer and produce their own meanings yet again.

I ask, what aspects of these possible spaces and temporalities are favored in a GLBT festival and why? The physical room of the cinema, its space, accommodates an ephemeral convergence of seemingly anonymous strangers melded into an audience of spectators, whose members perhaps share certain taste, education, age, class, race, gender or sexual identities and interests. It is likely that there is some prior relation between audience members who move in the same scene—e.g. shared spaces of bars and dance clubs, professional associations and community activism, dating websites, gyms, and other activities.

Some might argue that venues should be interchangeable, non-places in Augé's sense, while others might be sensitive to the placeness of the potential venue, site of exhibition, or site of festivality. If we consider that the film festival might be a constellation of multiple cinema venues, that adds another dimension to this analysis. In a sense, the festival then creates a set of relations between the diverse sites, their audiences and the film programs. What films are screened in which venue? How do the sites relate to the host city in which they are embedded? For example, is the neighborhood friendly and familiar or alienating and dangerous?

4.

"Heterotopias are most often linked to slices in time," or open onto *heterochronies* (26). The heterotopia begins to function fully once there is a break in traditional time.

Film festivals may be understood as archives of sorts, along the lines posited by

Africa's touring LBGT film festival.

Hong Kong's vibrant queer film festival, retaining its importance internationally and in Asia.

Jose Munoz (1996) and Anne Cvetkovich (2003) regarding them in terms of performance and ephemerality. In contrast to the pursuit of time, accumulated by the traditional archive of documents, the heterotopias of the festival are flowing, fleeting, ephemeral. As Foucault writes:

> "not oriented toward the eternal, they are rather absolutely temporal [chroniques]" (26).

Munoz specifies:

> "Ephemera […] is linked to alternate modes of textuality and narrativity like memory and performance: it is all of those things that remain after a performance, a kind of evidence of what has transpired but certainly not the thing itself. It does not rest on epistemological foundations but is instead interested in following traces, glimmers, residues, and specks of things." (1996, 10)

The festival as event proposes highly complicated layers of temporalities, including the flows of narrative time in the individual film on the screen, groupings in film programs, and the whole selection of films. Not only are there temporalities within and between films, there are the larger temporal frames of the festivals as annual events and as events condensed into a definite number of days.

Historically, festivals and the carnival have their origin in the religious calendar of feast days. Often they require specific rituals to accompany their celebration. Festivals add seasonal rhythm, punctuate the calendar year, provide the social context for a collective gathering of people over a fixed number of days, and have an associated print culture and public. They also exist in relation to other festivals and events throughout the year. Modern (secular) arts and film festivals inherit all those general characteristics, while showing, in principle, the best films of the year, accompanied with retrospectives of favored films from the past.

Church Street through Toronto's gay village egies of making visible selected parts of the city.

Trans-lations: Transgender Film Festival, Seattle, is a part of the surge in transgender film festivals, distinct from the lesbian and gay ones.

5.

On the fifth characteristic, Foucault writes,

> "Heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable."

Unlike the freely accessible public place, people enter certain heterotopias via compulsory entry, as in Foucault's example of the prison or psychiatric ward and sometimes with rites and purification. Other heterotopias appear to be open to all but "generally hide curious exclusions" (26). Foucault specifies,

> "Everyone can enter into the heterotopic sites, but in fact that is only an illusion—we think we enter where we are, by the very fact that we enter, excluded" (26).

Entry into the space may give the appearance of admittance but other forms of exclusion may be at play. Transgender activist and historian Vivienne Namaste gives the poignant example of the experience of transgendered people in Montreal gay bars, who are restricted to serving as entertainers for gay men, if they are admitted into the spaces at all. Also, if and when a particular bar or dance club enforces a gender preference or other preference at the door, perhaps dress code or look, such restricted admission is common to many types of dance clubs (Namaste 2000). Evidently, physical entry into the site does not guarantee full admission.

Diverse cultural codes must be learned and practiced. For a compelling film example, consider a young Al Pacino who plays a police officer with a girlfriend in the infamous *Cruising* (USA 1980). He goes undercover as a gay man in order to infiltrate the underground gay S&M leather scene in New York City to solve a series of murders.
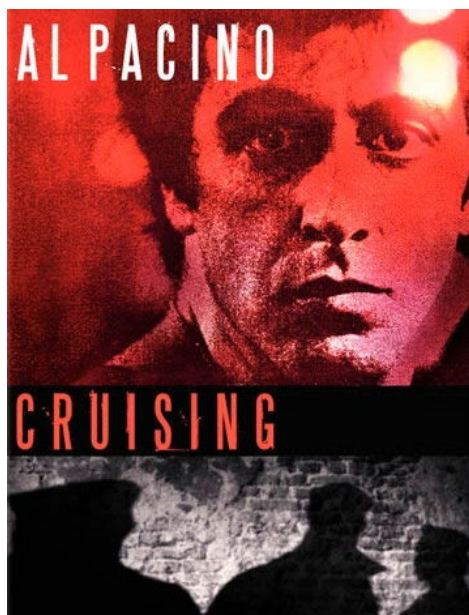
William Friedkin's film *Cruising* provides a compelling yet controversial study of coded spaces and infiltration, as Al Pacino's character goes undercover to catch a serial murder who has infiltrated the gay S/M world in New York City.

Cruising shows us how the detective learned the specific codes of this subculture to pass, which made the film highly contested in the early 1980s, for many gay activists understood it then as a prescription and justification for further violent gay-bashings or worse.[20] [open notes in new window] Not only was this idea of infiltration contested but also the particular nature of the representation of the gay culture, particularly the fear that the larger public would take the highly specialized underground sado-masochist leather world for the whole. The cost of admission was deadly for some; the serial murder narrative in *Cruising*, in which an infiltrating killer targets the S/M community, effectively brings out the complexity of highly coded social spaces and their negotiation on the screen and off.

Curiously, film festivals also have restrictions through their prices of admission and levels of access. Film festivals of any type have a highly structured hierarchy of admission. There is quite a variety of levels of participation possible marked by the color of a person's festival pass. Of course, the physical entry of the individual-ticket holder into the screening does not guarantee full admission to the larger festival. Such large, expensive events always entail a delicate play between economic, social and cultural capital. A celebrity, recognized film critic, famous director, major donor, et al., are granted access to a special social circle, which excludes less known others.[21] [open endnotes in new window]

Pedro Almodovar with Penelope Cruz at Cannes 2009. Cannes first, then to the LGBT film festivals, among others.

Bruce LaBruce, with Kelly Calabrese, LA Zombie premiere at TIFF (Toronto International Film Festival), no longer starting at the DIY exhibition sites of earlier years.

A screening of Midi Onodera's short film *Ten Cents a Dance* provoked what has become infamously known as the "lesbian riot" at the San Francisco LBGT Film Festival.

Greg Araki's *Kaboom* premiere at Cannes

Kaboom poster with Cannes logo. As filmmakers gain recognition, their publics multiply and grow in members.

Furthermore, with theer added explicit emphasis on sexualities, lesbian and gay film festival bring with them a range of cultural codes and identities, which aim to

25th anniversary of the London LGBT Film Festival, with the poster that suggests perhaps a multiplicity of tastes in happy unity with one another.

Poster from the White Party, Palm Springs, a well-known "circuit party," usually indicated by a color, specific type of dance music, large number of gay party goers, lasting more or less nonstop over a long weekend with plenty of recreational drugs and sex, and often held in a sunny location.

reflect the diversity of queers locally and internationally. As a result, one trend in lesbian and gay film festival programming is to sequester the spectators according to gender, generally presupposing that the boys will want to see boy films, the girls girl films. This enforces a reduced version of the politics of representation. Simply put, you are, want to become, or desire to be with whoever is on the screen before you. The consequences of this kind of programming let to the so-called lesbian riot at the San Francisco's festival in 1986, which has been studied widely.[22] At the 1986 San Francisco Lesbian and Gay Film Festival, one of the dedicated programs of films by and putatively for lesbian festival-goers was disrupted by frustrated members of the audience who had been expecting to see films of women but were surprised by a short triptych film with heterosexual, gay and lesbian sections. As Marc Siegel describes the screening,

> "The catalyst for the explosion was the screening one evening of Midi Onodera's TEN CENTS A DANCE (PARALLAX) at the close of a lesbian shorts program at the Roxie. TEN CENTS A DANCE is a 30-minute film divided into three sections, each of which depicts two people either discussing, having, or discussing as having sex. In the first section, two women at a dinner table in a Japanese restaurant discuss the possibilities of having a sexual relationship together. In the second, two men have sex in the stalls of a public bathroom." (1997)

Siegel continues,

> "At the Roxie that evening, the film progressed no further than the second section, the one depicting male-male sex, when some women in the audience became incensed. They stormed out of the theater, yelling and disrupting the screening for the other audience members. Frameline,[23] whose staff was verbally harassed during the riot, responded with a community forum a few months later on lesbian representation within the festival." (1997)

This example is but one of many that test and realign the queer film festival's sense of community from within its lived, social site, or in Elsaesser's terms *agora*. The spontaneous protest, certainly informed by a style of programming along with the heightened expectations that accompany it, is not isolated but one rather extreme tactic by which members of the public may on occasion voice their concerns, however critical. Importantly, such actions compelled the lesbian and gay film festival to change and sharpen its rules of programming, effectively its ethics of exhibition, under the umbrella of liberal pluralism.[24]

6.

Foucault finally posits "a function [for the heterotopia] in relation to all the space that remains." He states,

> "Either their role is to create a space of illusion that exposes every real space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned, as still more illusory [...]. Or else, on the contrary, their role is to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled" (27).

The first role of heterotopic space is to use illusion to prove the real illusionary, e.g. the brothel, while the second role is to create a perfect real space, e.g. religious colonies. A similar tension might be broadly posited between the worlds of the gay bathhouse or circuit party[25] and social activists or their groups.[26] Lesbian and gay film festivals would fall somewhere in between. On the one hand, they reveal the strange illusionary aspects of society's norms; on the other, they propose a variety of idealized identities and counterfactual worlds. The festivals are composed of the tensions between the conceits and deceits of the illusionary, its fabricated space and time, and its idealized and represented identities—altogether replete with contradictions.

Imagine+Nation in Montreal, Canada, combines two words to form one while superseding the linguistic challenges of its bilingual host city.

Just as the early 1990s hailed the arrival of the crossover films of the New Queer Cinema, during the same decade in North America and Western Europe marketing trends developed the notion of the financially lucrative "gay niche."[27] In a sense, the marketplace came to recognize the existence and arguably the legitimacy of gay culture after decades of public stigma and the first decade of the AIDS crisis. According to Sender among others, along with the lobbying efforts of lesbian and gay business insiders, corporations began to sponsor in a concerted effort events and advertise in LGBT media publicly, calculating that the risk of the loss to the social conservative boycott threats would be much less than the potential gains from certain demographics within the LGBT community.[28] This marketing logic made its way into tourism discourse, which in turn informed the decisions of many city councils on how to develop and financially exploit the hypothetically lucrative local gay niche and integrate it into the overall image of the city as a desirable welcoming destination for moneyed lesbians and gay men. The local gay villages were decorated with rainbow flag motifs, pride parades were expanded and transformed from community-oriented to product-placement, large circuit parties were promoted, even LGBT film festivals among other organizations attained greater visibility and grants. One clear consequence of this logic is that by presupposing a certain ideal type of lesbian or gay man, other types were automatically deemed less desirable. Cities were convinced that the pink dollar was worth courting, taking the principle of visibility as their guiding principle, which signaled a marked shift away from policies of moral indignation (shame, reticence and avoidance)[29] to those of enthusiastic capitalist embrace of new-found opportunities (Sender 2004; Bell 2004; Binnie 2004).

These trends in marketing and cultural policy are part of the overall enabling technè that work to constitute the festival and help to account for some of its changes. The significance of the choice of site in the city is highly practical and important: where the festival is held and how that can influence who attends the festival, and with what degree of comfort. Many questions come to mind in this respect: How does the choice of city, district, neighborhood, and its familiarity matter? And to whom? The politics of space do matter to this conceptual approach to community. For example, in many contemporary cases, a typical commercial multiplex is transformed by its suddenly changed public, which the festival brings to life.[30]

Heterotopias are not incommensurable with the notion of gay space, which carries with it substantive sexual and gender identities. *Gay or lesbian space* as a concept presupposes certain static relations. Alongside the spaces of sexual identities, however, process-oriented *queer space* or the queering of places into other places is centered on the concept of performativity. Thus, to think of queer space as not simply wherever LGBT bodies are would relax the requirement of substantive identity but would not disallow it. This concept also articulates some of the stranger relations that take place at such festivals. That is, people and their actions here and in time constitute the spaces in a complicated relation to the given buildings, architecture, commerce, laws, advertising, etc. While the concept of gay space specifically speaks to the space of identity, the concept of queer space addresses and uncovers the strangeness of the cultural formation, its presuppositions, and its participants. Together, they nuance the evolving heterotopia of the lesbian and gay film festival.

In summing up my position, I strongly suggest that Foucault's concept of heterotopia enables a rich theoretical articulation of the space of the lesbian and gay film festival in all its activists' plights, internal and external contestations, vicissitudes and transformations over the decades. To be sure, the concept may be used to probe different types of film festivals, but the uniqueness of the LGBT film festival emerges. It would be difficult to compare it with, say, a thematic film festival on fantasy or bicycling and bicycles. Simply put, the stakes are quite different. The unique place of community as a consequence and as a rhetorical

moment within the queer film festival as a lived site remains, on the one hand, open for analysis and, on the other hand, symptomatic of larger discourses at play in and about any particular festival. Recalling Foucault's figure of the mirror, the festival in part constitutes and in part distorts its public in its complicated chain of fleeting representations, resemblances and identifications. Its hybrid sexuality intermingling queer and substantive identities will remain a volatile mixture, as the attempted festivals in Sarajevo, Belgrade, and St Petersburg have recently demonstrated.

Go to notes page

To top   Print version   JC 54   *Jump Cut* home

Notes

1. I wish to thank those who provide critical comments at my presentation of some of this article at the NECS Conference at Lund University, Sweden, in 2009. Earlier versions stem from my dissertation (Zielinski 2009). I also wish to thank Professor Chris Straayer for generously hosting me as a FQRSC postdoctoral research fellow at the Tisch School of the Arts, New York University, where I was able to present parts of this text to her astute graduate students, and Professor Jane Gaines who graciously invited me to speak to her wonderful graduate class at Columbia University in 2010. I also thank the *Jump Cut* editors and reviewers for their generous constructive criticism that has helped me to improve the text.
[return to page 1 of essay]

2. See (Zielinski 2012) on the development of festival activism in the LGBT movement.

3. Patricia White's dossier in *GLQ* stands as an important pioneering collection of texts on the study and relevance of LGBT film festivals (1999).

4. Cf. Ruby Rich's 1992 article that lays out the groundwork for the idea of the New Queer Cinema.

5. Ragan Rhyne's political economy of the festivals and periodization concerns this and more (Rhyne 2007). Moreover, To be sure, lesbian- and gay-themed feature films have been a staple of international film festivals from the start. Similar to films from distant, foreign countries, they provide both increased diversity, adventure and perhaps some novel spice to any such festival. They appeal to both interested cinephiles but also attract its own appreciative "queer diasporic" audience. These festivals have in general provided a safe space of sorts for such programming. Richard Dyer addresses certain early gay stereotypes that circulated within popular culture, such as the sad young man, vampire, noir, etc., in his well known book (2001, 129 f.). In a quite different respect, some of the A-list festivals (or equivalent), such as Cannes, Berlin, Sundance, or Toronto, have been the preferred sites for world premieres of lesbian and gay films, with the promise of larger distribution deals and greater media exposure. Normally, a filmmaker seeks out the festival that will further her or his film and career the most, e.g. with Gregg Araki it would be Sundance or Cannes, and even the "reluctant pornographer" queercore badboy Bruce LaBruce premieres now at the Toronto International Film Festival. The community festivals typically provide local city premieres for the film, depending on the city, but almost never a world premiere. (I am currently editing a collection of articles on the question of value in film

festivals, specifically in relation to the theory of Pierre Bourdieu; my chapter "On the Play of Distinction in LGBT Film and Video Festivals" (Zielinski 2009, 260 f.) considers these issues in greater detail.)

6. The theorist of geography Edward Soja (1995) develops Foucault's heterotopia into postmodern heterotopologies relying on the work of Jean Baudrillard, et al. For criticism of his approach, see (Gregory 1994).

7. See More's 1516 book in Latin *De Optimo republicae statu deque nova insula Utopia*.

8. If anything, Foucault's extended commentaries stand as uncompromising critiques of modern psychoanalysis in its many variants, particularly his *History of Sexuality* (1976).

9. The word deviance here stems from the early social-scientistic discourse of the sociology of deviance, which attempts to describe and account for the behavior of those who break social norms and become "deviants."

10. The word 'queer' in this technical sense is a classic reappropriation of a pejorative term, but also celebrates sexual and other differences (e.g. Zielinski 2007).

11. See especially (Bakhtin 1984; cf. Stallybrass 1986).

12. Greyson's film is available at http://vimeo.com/6308870 due to his protest against the Toronto International Film Festival's inclusion of the Israeli showcase in 2009, which is another festival controversy worth some attention.

13. Basil Tsiokos' account of his experience as a guest programmer of the festival is remarkable (2008). [return to page 2]

14. Q! Festival in Jakarta, Indonesia, is notable in this case and has become a very successful touring festival in its country in spite of the verbal death threats made against its organizers. According to its co-founder John Badalu, it is the sole queer film festival in the Muslim world (2011).

15. For example, Joseph Massad's article "Re-Orienting Desire: The Gay International and the Arab World" addresses issues concerning (western) homosexuality in the Muslim Arab world.

16. Somewhat similar issues arose in the case of the early erotic film festivals, as they were called in the early 1970's. Elena Gorfinkel has published an insightful study of the main three, in San Francisco, New York and Amsterdam (2006). As the pornography laws changed in the United States in the late 1960's, new types of narrative feature-length pornographic films became common and even fashionable to a younger, college-age demographic during a period of heightened sexual experimentation. However, not every city was so welcoming to these festivals. However, the San Francisco one was strongly contested by members of the city council and brought to trial several times, and none of the festivals lasted beyond 1972 (see also, Zielinski 2009, 86 f.). A more recent incarnation of the erotic film festival is the annual

CineKink in New York City, founded by Lisa Vandever; it builds on the sex-positive ethos of the early festivals, and also travels to Las Vegas, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Portland, Chicago and Washington D.C. These festivals have not experienced any antagonism in their respective cities. According to the executive director, they choose their cities very carefully within the United States and rarely put on screenings outside of the country (Vandever 2012).

17. For more on the relationship between globalization, sexuality and sexual identities, see the work of Dennis Young and critical responses by others. See also my article with Skadi Loist on LGBT media activism (2012), furthermore (Bao 2010; Yang 2010) on the situation in China.

18. I am currently working on a paper that explores the concept of festivality which includes the nature and qualities of being a festival, but exceeds the pejorative notion of the festivalization of culture as a denigration or the turning of culture into a series of mere spectacles.

19. Consider the recent controversy over *Gendercator* (2007) at the San Francisco festival. More recently, similar controversies have arisen in 2007 over Catherine Crouch's short video. After criticism of the film from transgender activists San Francisco International LGBT Film Festival canceled the film's screening over fears that it might insult members of the transgender community. This prompted discussions between conflicting transgender and lesbian viewpoints, and members of the latter counter-charged that it was an act of censorship (Bajko 2007). One transgender blogger writes, "So WHY IS FRAMELINE SHOWING AN ANTI-TRANS FILM at the LGBT FILM FESTIVAL THIS YEAR??? Showing at the SF International LGBT Film Festival on June 15th at 10:30 p.m. is *The Gendercator*, an ignorant, transphobic film by midwest lesbian director Catherine Crouch that depicts a 1970s "feminist" tomboy who awakens in the 21st Century to find that some of her friends have become men. 'They made me do it. They'll make you too,' a transman (referred to by Crouch as an 'altered lesbian') tells his friend. Transsexuality is portrayed as the evil that has taken over the world, and as a way to enforce heteronormativity. A 'butch rescue squad' helps the lesbian escape the horror" (emphasis in the original text). In the end, the festival was charged, on the one hand, for being insensitive to one of its communities and, on the other, for practicing undue censorship. Naturally, with such vociferous commentary circulating about the film, interest from all sides was perked.

20. Remarkably, every LGBT archive that I have consulted in North America appears to possess documents from the campaign against the release of the film, including posters, fliers, and announcements of meetings and discussions. See (Wilson 1981) for a thoughtful analysis of the context leading up to the film's release, and a more recent (Rendall 2008, 34). While the outcry against the film at the time of its making and exhibition was strong, it was also ambivalent, and may echo recent attempts to re-address the film as a document of a historical underground scene just before AIDS fundamentally altered such sexual spaces and their practices. As Thomas Waugh notes in passing, "[...] in the epicenter of the pandemic, my queer film class watched *Cruising* with uncritical awe; for them it was an ethnographic account of a

distant culture that had gone with the wind." (Waugh 2000, x)

21. Marijke de Valck writes on the value-added elements at international film festivals (2006)

22. See (Siegel 1997) and (Rich 1999), two different approaches to the same *différend.*

23. 'Frameline' is the common short form for the San Francisco Lesbian and Gay Film Festival and includes a film distribution company.

24. See (Rastegar 2009), a study of the Los Angeles LGBT festival's attempt with its Fusion Festival.

25. The large weekend-long (or longer) parties take place at convenient holidays in large cities or vacation destinations across the calendar year, while most research centers on drug addiction, substance abuse and other health issues, see (Carrington 2005) for an ethnographical study of the circuit scenes.

26. A good example of this tension at work is from few years ago when Montreal's pride week split into two factions. On the one side, there is Divers/Cité, the party-oriented series of events, and on the other side, there is now Fièreté, the community-oriented displays, and events, including the parade.

27. See, for example, (Sender 2004) for a history and explanation of this development.

28. For further studies on this, see (Jenkins 1998) or (Richardson 2005).

29. I write about shame and architecture, specifically as manifested in the facades of gay bars and strip clubs (Zielinski 2003).

30. Bociurkiw describes the parallel queues at a Toronto megaplex: on the one side, keen Star Wars fans prepped for another rerelease, and on the other, ticket-holders for the Inside/Out LGBT Film Festival (2002). Another intriguing example concerns the change of venue in sunny Los Angeles and the sting that accompanies (Brooke 1998).

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Glee: coming out on U.S. teen television

by Whitney Monaghan
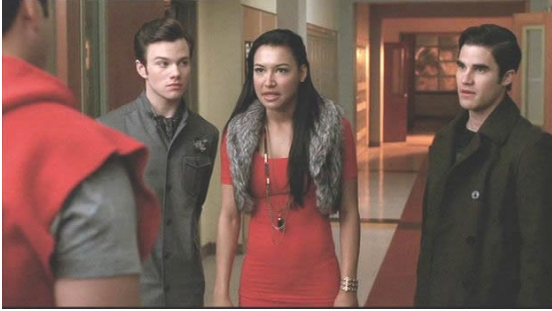
Employing an ensemble of queer adolescent characters, *Glee* offers multiple variations to the coming out narrative.

In 1994, *My So-Called Life'*s Rickie Vasquez (Wilson Cruz) was the only gay teenage character on U.S. primetime television.

In a special report for *Entertainment Weekly* in January 2011, Jennifer Armstrong notes that over the past few decades,

> "gay characters have gone from one time guest stars, whispered tragedies, and silly sidekicks to not just an accepted but an *expected* part of teen-centric television" (36, original emphasis).

Within this teen genre, however, gay or queer adolescent characters have traditionally functioned almost exclusively within the coming out narrative. Whether focusing on a character actively coming out *or* being removed of their agency and subsequently outed, this narrative emphasizes the climactic revelation of non-heterosexuality in a manner that has lead critics such as Glyn Davis to question whether queerness can ever exist as anything else within televisual narratives. As Susan Driver notes, the representation of queerness as nothing more than revelation emphasizes a "brief moment of visible difference" whilst denying the possibility of television to "expand and contextualise [the] experience" of being young and queer beyond this (58). This is because, as Glyn Davis and Gary Needham discuss in their recent *Queer TV: Theories, Histories, Politics*,

> "the revelation of a character's homosexuality [often] quickly leads to narrative redundancy after said disclosure. Most of the gay and lesbian characters... have little to do after they come out, and more often than not they eventually get written out" (7).

However, as this article suggests, Fox's *Glee* (2009-present) poses an alternative to the more conventional representations of queerness on teen television, particularly in the context of coming out. Employing an ensemble of queer adolescent characters rather than a solitary queer figure, *Glee* offers multiple variations to the coming out narrative. This article discusses these variations with emphasis on storylines featuring Kurt and Santana as these characters feature more prominently within the series as a whole. Through consideration of different modes of coming out enacted by the series, this article poses the argument that *Glee* represents a significant departure from the norms of both the teen genre and the coming out narrative.

In the final episode of *My So-Called Life* Rickie's coming out narrative reaches itsclimax. This is catalysed by the misplaced heterosexual desires of new student, Delia (Senta Moses).

In 2009, a similar character named Kurt Hummel (Chris Colfer) graced U.S. television screens in the hit musical/comedy series *Glee*.

Prime time television's first ongoing queer adolescent character was introduced in 1994 in the short-lived teen drama series *My So-Called Life* (Armstrong). Unlike the contemporary situation, where there are many queer adolescent characters across many different series, in the mid 1990s Rickie Vasquez (Wilson Cruz) was the *only* gay teenager on primetime American television. Audiences were first introduced to Rickie in the very first episode of *My So-Called Life*. A few minutes into the episode, protagonist Angela Chase (Claire Danes)—reflecting, quite lyrically about the pressures felt as a girl growing up in the 1990s —peers out of a window as she walks down a school hallway. She spies two rebellious teenagers skipping class as she muses, "School is a battlefield for your heart." The scene fades to black but the monologue continues, "So when Rayanne Graff told me my hair was holding me back, I had to listen," as the black screen is replaced by a dripping mass of wet hair. As Angela ties it back, her voice goes on, "Because she wasn't just talking about my hair. She was talking about my life," and the camera zooms out to reveal Rickie for the first time. He stands, wearing a flamboyantly coloured sweater—chequered black and yellow with red pom-poms—and rinses the dye from Angela's hair. In this episode, we next encounter Rickie in the girls' bathroom, a place where we will often come to see him, putting on his eyeliner and "giving the male perspective" in a discussion about boys. As Glyn Davis suggests,

> "with his subtly camp eye rolls and hand gestures, single gold earring, penchant for eyeliner, soft voice and preference for hanging out in the girls' toilets, Rickie was always fairly clearly coded as queer" (Davis 128).

However, it was not until the season final that Rickie finally articulated the word, "gay." Nevertheless, in this first episode, Rickie's association with Rayanne Graff marks him as a rebellious figure and his association with femininity through the hair dye, the eyeliner and the girls' bathroom denote a queerness to his character that although not explicitly referred to until the final episode of the series, remains constant throughout. Over the course of the series Rickie becomes aligned within these 'feminine' settings such as the girls' bathroom rather than those that would be traditionally be considered masculine such as the football field, or neutral: the school hallway or classroom.

In the final episode of the series, Rickie's coming out narrative reaches climax when he finally articulates the words that the audience have understood all along. This final episode revolves around the dreams of each of the characters. New student, Delia (Senta Moses), has a romantic dream about Rickie that she tells a friend who tells a friend, and so on, until it is eventually passed around the school. When Rickie

"There's nothing ironic about show choir!" The Glee Club is a refuge where "the invisible" misfit students are given a voice.

When Kurt is first introduced, he appears small, feminine and fragile.

Like Rickie, Kurt is coded queer from the outset of the series through his one-liners, costuming and high vocal range.

learns of this, his response, "I-I can't even believe it. I mean it's such an unfamiliar experience. Do you realize how much easier my life would be if I could just like her back? I mean... this could be my chance...to be straight," reflects a desire to 'pass' as straight in order to achieve his dream of a normal, easy, heterosexual life. Later in this episode, an exchange between Rickie and Delia results in the revelation of his (non hetero-) sexuality. Attempting to capitalize on his "chance...to be straight," Rickie asks Delia on a date but is eventually confronted with the disjuncture between his fantasy and reality.

> **Rickie:** Uh, Delia? Maybe we should, uh, go somewhere sometime?
> **Delia:** Okay.
> **Rickie:** You know, like, uh, to a movie or something.
> **Delia:** I'd like that.
> **Rickie:** 'Cause, um. I-I really think that we'd be good together.
> **Delia:** Okay, but um, you're gay, right?
> **Rickie:** Well, I, you know, I, I-
> **Delia:** Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't-
> **Rickie:** No, it-it-it's okay.
> **Delia:** That came out so rude.
> **Rickie:** No, uh, see I-I try not to, um, no, I-I don't like, uh...Yeah, I'm gay. I just don't usually say it like that.
> **Delia:** And how do you usually say it?
> **Rickie:** I don't usually say it. I mean, I've actually said it... out loud.

In 2009, fifteen years later—or, the time it takes for one generation of adolescents to reach teenage maturity—a similar character graced U.S. and later worldwide television screens in Fox's *Glee*. Brainchild of Ryan Murphy, Ian Brennan and Brad Falchuck, *Glee* focuses on a group of misfit Midwestern high school students who are members of the 'New Directions' Glee Club. As is expected within the teen genre, each character enters the narrative as a fairly specific stereotype (Shary). Over the course of the series, however, these stereotypes are broken down as each of the characters recognizes familiarity in one another.

With wide framed glasses, bowl-cut hairstyle, suspenders and a wheelchair, Artie Abrams (Kevin McHale) is quite clearly coded as the nerd of the group. He is joined by quiet Asian, Tina Cohen-Chang (Jenna Ushkowitz) who dresses in gothic clothing and stutters her way through the first several episodes before revealing that her stutter is performed so that people will leave her alone; plus-sized African American diva, Mercedes Jones (Amber Riley); Broadway-loving, feminine Kurt Hummel (Chris Colfer); precocious over-achiever, Rachel Berry (Lea Michele); and Finn Hudson (Cory Monteith) the well-meaning, slightly dim, quarterback of the football team. These outcast characters are eventually joined by three cheerleaders, lovingly dubbed 'the unholy trinity' by fans of the series: promiscuous ditzy blond, Brittany S. Pierce (Heather Morris); similarly promiscuous, manipulative and fiery Latina, Santana Lopez (Naya Rivera); and Quinn Fabray (Dianna Agron), head cheerleader and president of the celibacy club. With his trademark Mohawk hairstyle, juvenile

Kurt's coming out narrative is catalysed by misplaced heterosexual desire. In this scene, the cheerleaders attempt to convince Mercedes (Amber Riley) that Kurt wants to be her boyfriend.

Glee employs the misplaced heterosexual desire as an element of comedy. In this scene, Rachel (Lea Michele) and Tina (Jenna Ushkowitz) hold a "gay-vention."

When Mercedes confronts Kurt, he appears horrified but attempts to pass as heterosexual.

delinquent Noah Puckerman (Mark Salling) rounds off the group.

As cheerleading coach, Sue Sylvester (Jane Lynch) notes in the first episode, "[this] high school is a caste system. Kids fall into certain slots. Jocks and popular kids [are] up in the penthouse; the invisibles and the kids playing live-action druids and trolls out in the forest, bottom floor." And the Glee Club, she notes, are thus located in the "sub-basement." In a broader school environment that silences difference, the Glee Club becomes a kind of refuge where the "invisibles" and minority characters are rendered visible and are allowed to articulate themselves.

Cited in 2010 as "*the most important character on television right now*" (original emphasis) by Tim Stack in an *Entertainment Weekly* recap of *Glee* episodes, Kurt Hummel is the first of these teenager characters that audiences are introduced to. Standing by a dumpster, encircled by a group of burly, thug-like teenage boys, Kurt appears particularly small and fragile. His form-fitting, cobalt blue jacket is an immediate visual contrast to the matching red varsity athlete jackets of the bullies. "Please, this is Marc Jacobs' new collection" he pleads as the boys pick him up to throw him in the dumpster. A single male voice commands the thugs to "wait!" allowing Kurt to remove the jacket before being thrown in with the trash. The next lines spoken by Kurt, indicating "Mr Cellophane" as his song choice for his Glee Club audition, further assert the feminine qualities to his voice; his song choice reflective of his feelings of invisibility and unimportance in the social environment of the school.

Like Rickie, Kurt is coded from the outset as queer through his costuming, one-liners, high vocal range and strong desire to sing traditionally feminine songs. Also like Rickie, Kurt's coming out is catalysed by misplaced heterosexual desire. However, where *My So-Called Life* employs this desire to emphasize the drama in the climax of the narrative, *Glee* employs it primarily as an element of comedy. In the third episode, the manipulative cheerleaders attempt to convince Mercedes that Kurt wants to be her boyfriend. Despite her initial response, "I don't think I'm his type" –indicating that she understands Kurt's femininity as code for queerness—Mercedes eventually asks him out on a date.

> **Mercedes**: So, would you ever... You know, want to hang out?
> **Kurt**: Come over! It's Liza Minnelli Week on AMC!

Following this, Rachel and Tina lead a "gay-vention" which they describe as a "gay intervention,"

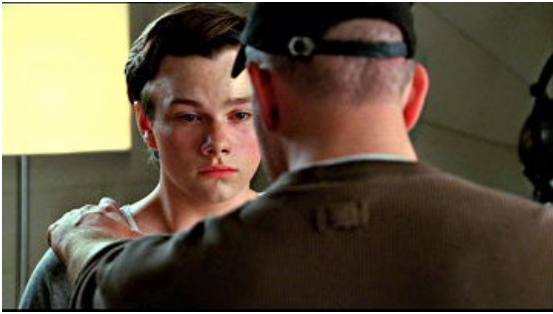> **Tina**: It's Kurt. He's lady fabulous.
> **Rachel**: It's obvious you like him. We just don't want you to get hurt by feelings he can't...reciprocate.
> **Mercedes**: Look, just because he wears nice clothes, doesn't mean he's on the down low.

Kurt eventually confides in Mercedes. However, in contrast to *My So-Called Life*, this is positioned as a narrative beginning.

Kurt comes out to his father in this scene.

And as Jennifer Armstrong notes, Kurt's father's positive response signalled "the birth of a new kind of gay hero" (36).

Rachel: He wore a corset to second period today.
Mercedes: [shrugs]

In a later scene, after Mercedes and Kurt have gone out on a series of 'dates', Mercedes asks Kurt if they can make their dating official. Appearing horrified at this thought, Kurt immediately responds, "I'm sorry, Mercedes. But I thought I made it very clear…I'm in love with someone else" as he looks over her shoulder at Finn, clearly signalling his desire for the football player. However, when Mercedes turns she sees Rachel instead of Finn. Unable to divulge the truth to Mercedes, Kurt goes along with this, mentioning that he has indeed been in love with Rachel "for several years now." At the conclusion of this episode, however, Kurt is unable to continue with this lie and when Mercedes approaches him, he divulges,

Kurt: Mercedes, I lied to you—I don't like Rachel.

With tears in his eyes and a quiver of hesitation in his voice, Kurt utters the words that the audience have anticipated since the very first scene at the dumpster, "I'm gay." Mercedes, not appearing shocked, simply asks why he did not tell her, to which he responds, "Because I've never told anyone before."

The similarities between this coming out moment and Rickie's in *My So-Called Life* are explicit. Both narratives feature a misunderstanding or misreading of desire, both characters consider the possibility of passing as straight, and for both characters, this is a big moment: the first articulation of their sexualities. However, where Rickie's story ended after his climactic coming out moment with Delia, Kurt's story continued. It took Kurt a further episode to come out to his father— something that Rickie never did—and even then his story continued. Jennifer Armstrong notes that Kurt's coming out and his father's nonchalant response—"I've known since you were three years old. All you wanted for your birthday was a pair of sensible heels…If that's who you are, there's nothing I can do about it. And I love you just as much"—signalled the birth of a new kind of gay hero, "one who's loved as much for his boa wearing as he is for fending off bullies" (Armstrong 36). However, where *Glee* truly marks itself as unique is in the fact that the coming out moment between Kurt and Mercedes is one of many for both this character and the series as a whole.

As earlier noted by Armstrong, queer characters have recently become an expected part of the teen genre (36). However, this cannot always be cause for celebration because as Davis argues, although queer adolescent characters appear on television in larger numbers than ever they are often

> "absorbed into the heterosexuality of the medium and its representations. In relation to television, that is, queers always have to find a place in a heterosexual structure and system" (129).

Davis further argues that the general "liberal conservatism" of televisual representations of queerness means that "only certain types of queers get represented, and only certain issues are addressed by the programs in which they appear" (130). To put this simply, "if the teen series has the potential to tell us things about queer teens, it will only tell us certain things," (Davis 130) and will necessarily omit others.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, a number of critics (see: Allen; McCarthy) argued that the medium of television in "its institutionalised form is antipathetic or inimical to queerness" (Davis 127). That is, for a number of reasons, critics have argued that television and queerness are incompatible. Writing in the late 1990s, Dennis Allen outlines a reason for this, arguing that until the mid 1990s essentially only one homosexual storyline could occur in heterosexually dominated series' and it was the "revelation of homosexuality" (610), suggesting that queer characters could only be ever active within coming out narratives. In 2001, in an analysis of the 1990s sitcom *Ellen*, Anna McCarthy argues that it is queerness itself that poses a problem for "the unfolding of [television's] temporal structures" (McCarthy 597). According to McCarthy, this problem lies in the "difficulty of making same-sex desire uneventful, serial, everyday" (McCarthy 609). Extending these arguments beyond the early 2000s, Glyn Davis significantly questions whether it is at all possible "to depict overt homosexuality in television drama as anything other than a revelation?" (128).

Buffy the Vampire Slayer's Willow Rosenberg (Alyson Hannigan) was one of only four major queer teenage characters on U.S. network television between 1980 and 2000. However, Willow's relationship with Tara began in the college setting.

The number of queer teenage characters on U.S. television increased throughout the 2000s with series such as *South of Nowhere*.

As a rite of passage, a personal-as-political action or gesture, a challenge to normative identity politics, or simply the negotiation of "social boundaries that define both sex and sexuality" (Monaghan 58), coming out is "embedded in the very structures of gay and lesbian culture" (Bronski 20). To come out is to acknowledge one's romantic or sexual desires for the same sex, it is to claim the identity of being gay, lesbian, queer or any other form of non-heterosexuality, it is to act sexually on these desires, and it is to publicly declare this identity (Bronski 20). But how does this translate to the visual medium of television? Michael Bronski argues,

> "Coming out is essentially a complicated internal process, not a simple public act. Yet film [and we might also add television], more than any other narrative form—such as the novel, for instance, which can easily portray internal realities—relies almost entirely on external conflicts." (21)

To visually articulate these internal processes, coming out on television often involves a verbal expression of sexual identity. This typically takes the form of a public or semi-public declaration—such as the conversation between Mercedes and Kurt or between Kurt and his father—that followed by a conflict that arises "between the gay person and her or his family or peer group" (Bronski 21). In contemporary teen film and television, this act of self-enunciation and the conflict that follows occupies a "pivotal position in the...narrativisation of queer adolescent subjectivity" (Davis 131). Captured in these moments, according to Davis, is often "the *first* experience of coming out, a self-conscious taking-on of a new, specific identity" (131).

As a narrative possibility for gay, lesbian and queer characters in film and television, the coming out narrative is only several decades old despite the fact that, as Bronski argues, it is "embedded" in contemporary queer culture (20). Until the late 60s, homosexual desire was routinely represented as "some form of social, personal or psychological tragedy" (Bronski 21). With their lives "predicated and protected by secrecy" these characters were removed of their narrative agency and "being public meant, not coming out, but being outed" (Bronski 21).

Rebecca Beirne notes that during the 1970s and 1980s, queer audiences rarely saw themselves on television and "when they did, it was usually as monsters or victims, objects of revulsion or pity. Or perhaps as a once-off 'lesson' in tolerance, never to be heard from again" (Beirne, *Televising Queer Women* 2). Although the first 'lesbian' kiss on television occurred in the mid 1970s on Australia's *The Box* (1974-1976), it was not until 1988 that primetime U.S. television even saw its first recurring lesbian character. Even then, however, the United States and UK did not televise lesbian kisses until 1991 and 1993 respectively (Beirne). Through the late 1980s and early 1990s the coming out film gained popularity and these narratives began to migrate to television from the mid 1990s onwards, with Ellen DeGeneres' character Ellen marking a significant milestone and coming out on the sitcom *Ellen* in 1997. Although ongoing gay and lesbian

Kurt's storyline continues as he faces increasingly intense homophobic bullying from thuggish football players.

Kurt eventually confronts David Karofsky (Max Adler)...

... and it is revealed that Karofsky's homophobic bullying stems from repression.

Karofsky, however, is not depicted as a one-dimensional self-destructive figure. He later forms one half of an anti-bullying group...

characters have been slowly emerging in adult-oriented television since around this period, it is important to note that ongoing gay, lesbian or queer adolescent characters have remained far less visible. In fact, there were only four major queer adolescent characters on U.S. network television between 1980 and 2000:

- Billy Douglas (Ryan Philippe) in serial daytime drama *One Life to Live* (1968-2012, character appeared 1992-1993),
- Rickie Vasquez in primetime teen drama series *My So-Called Life* (1994),
- Jack McPhee (Kerr Smith) in *Dawson's Creek* (1998-2003, character came out in 1999) and
- Willow Rosenberg (Alyson Hannigan) in *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003, character came out in 2000). However, Willow's relationships with women began in a college setting, troubling her configuration as a queer teen.

Cable television offered similar fare during this period with MTV's popular reality program *The Real World* (1992-present) featuring a number of young gay cast members over the age of 18. However, MTV later aired a night drama series called *Undressed* (1999-2002) that focused on the social and sexual interactions of high school and college students and featured a number of gay characters. The U.S .version of *Queer as Folk* (2000-2005) was also notable during this period for featuring a gay teenage character named Justin (Randy Harrison).

This sparseness of representation is an implication of a more general restriction on sexual expression on teen television. In the United States, it is not legal for adolescents to have sex until 18, which varies somewhat by state. Teen television finesses this by implying sexual content rather than overtly depicting it. As Victor Strasburger argues,

> "Although American media are not the most sexually explicit media in the world, they are the most sexually suggestive" (273).

In terms of cinematic representation, critics have observed that films in the teen genre contain "quite a bit of passionate kissing and sexual dialogue and fewer instances of implied intercourse and intimate touching" (Callister et al 470). However, as television programs—particularly those on network television—must conform to rather strict and conservative guidelines, the medium is generally understood as being more sexually suggestive than film. Strasburg further emphasizes, "What television shows suggest, movies actually show" (274). Indeed, conservative groups often consider the overt depiction of homosexuality as 'inappropriate' content for adolescent audiences, rendering queerness something to be suggested or implied within many television programs.

Despite this, the number of queer adolescent characters in television increased on both network and broadcast television steadily through the 2000s, with series such as *The OC, One Tree Hill, South of Nowhere* and more recently *Gossip Girl, Pretty Little Liars,* and *90210* all examples of this. However, although these numbers continue to increase, the fact that homosexuality is "not assumed but is itself that produces narrative complication" (Allen 611) still means that disclosure of a character's (non hetero-) sexuality is often "substituted for any [other] possible narrative, romantic or otherwise, predicated on such a sexuality" (Allen 611). The concerning issue is not that there are not enough queer adolescent

... and offers a heartfelt apology to Kurt.

In this scene, Kurt encounters a reformed Karofsky at a gay bar where he reveals that he is still 'in the closet'.

Kurt's future boyfriend, Blaine Anderson (Darren Criss), is introduced when Kurt begins attending a private boys' school. Blaine nonchalantly articulates his sexuality within minutes of meeting Kurt.

characters on contemporary television but that they enter their respective series or narratives as heterosexual characters. Coming out is the only narrative possibility for such characters as the conventional coming out narrative relies on the assumption of heterosexuality whilst depicting the act of coming out as "the only way for a queer teenager to achieve his/her personal, social, cultural *and* sexual liberation" (Padva 368). In many of these examples, particularly those of the early to mid 2000s, the queer characters are transient figures, either reverting to an initial state of heterosexuality or disappearing completely once the storyline has concluded.

Discussing Rickie Vasquez's coming out moment, Glyn Davis writes that coming out scenes in teen television "seem to reinforce the act as an individualised one…an exultant liberationist confession of one's essential(ised) identity" (Davis 131). However, he further notes that in addition to this, scenes such as Rickie Vasquez's coming out can offer the potential to

> "enact a complicated enunciation of queerness, in which, despite privileging a liberal paradigm, a range of different modes of homosexuality are brought into play" (131).

However, it is my understanding that much contemporary television is limited in its capacity to enact this "complicated enunciation of queerness" because coming out happens just once, to one character. Further, because coming out is represented in these narratives as a climax in the ultimate process of coming of age (see: Monaghan), the act of coming out is "not only an end in itself, but *the* end" to this singular narrative (Bronski 20). At this point it is wise to return to the beginning of this article, to Rickie Vasquez, and consider what Glyn Davis writes:

> "Rickie's final substantial scene in *My So-Called Life*, then, is centred around his coming out, which would seem to suggest such a confession as a potential narrative end point… But should it not have been a beginning?" (128).

Glee asserts itself from the outset as significant because it does not represent the revelation of queerness as a singular narrative end point. Indeed Kurt comes out to Mercedes within the first few episodes of *Glee*, presenting an alternative to the traditional coming out narrative via a queer storyline that only begins with the revelation of the character's sexuality. Through this, *Glee* represents coming out as simply another aspect of contemporary queer adolescent experience that is no more or less important than other teen issues. Further challenging the traditional representation of queerness on television in which a solitary queer character enacts a single coming out, *Glee* subsequently focuses on an ensemble of queer teenage characters, each of them coming out in different manners. Through this, *Glee* offers a rare glimpse of queer teen community and redefining coming out as a complex and variable process rather than a singular, unchanging act.

After coming out early in the first season, Kurt faces increasing homophobic bullying which builds from threats of physical violence, to actual physical violence, to threats of death. This eventually causes Kurt to move schools for a period of time. The intense physical bullying that he

Villainous queer student, Sebastian Smythe (Grant Gustin), is introduced in the third season.

The queer teen ensemble is completed with the addition of cheerleaders Brittany S. Peirce (Heather Morris) and Santana Lopez (Naya Rivera).

An intimate relationship between Brittany and Santana is hinted at when Brittany says, "If sex was dating, Santana and I would be dating," during this group phone call.

Brittany and Santana initially perform their sexual relationship for the viewing pleasure of Finn, promising him that they will make out in front of him if he buys them dinner.

faces comes primarily from David Karofsky (Max Adler), a thuggish football player. Karofsky harbours secret queer desires that surface as Kurt attempts to stand up for himself and his brutish actions are revealed to stem from both internalized homophobia and shame. As with much cinematic characterisation, the destructiveness of internalized homophobia here serves to excuse or soften audience attitudes toward the character's homophobic actions. As James Keller argues, films such as *American Beauty*

> "discredit homophobes by revealing that their hyperbolic hatred of gay men is indicative of their own pathological need to deny perverse longings" (183).

The danger in this is that the association between repressed queer desire and violence both "absolves the heterosexual community of responsibility for the violent repression of gays and lesbians" and "pathologizes gays as self-destructive" (Keller 183). Karofsky, however, is not depicted as a one-dimensional figure, driven only by repressed desire as he undergoes significant transformation throughout the second season. After realising the consequences of his actions, eventually offering a heartfelt apology to Kurt and—becoming a favourite with fans—he forms one-half of an anti-bullying group called "The Bully Whips." However, he remains resistant to conventional modes of coming out and refuses when prompted by Kurt on a number of occasions. In the third season, Karofsky is largely absent, having changed schools, but Kurt encounters him at a gay bar called "Scandals," where he reveals that he is still 'in the closet.'

> **Karofksy**: Is this the part where you judge me?
> **Kurt**: So long as you're not beating people up I'm all for being whoever you have to be at your own speed.
> **Karofsky**: Right now I'm just trying to get through high school.

A further prominent queer character is introduced when Kurt begins attending Dalton Academy, a private boys' school, where he meets openly gay Blaine (Darren Criss) who eventually becomes his boyfriend. Blaine comes out in an offhanded manner within minutes of meeting Kurt when Kurt questions a group of Dalton students about their sexuality. However, he later mentions being bullied in the past, his disapproving family and considers the possibility of bisexuality in one episode. In this particular episode, he goes out on a date with Rachel and yells at Kurt for expressing bi-phobic attitudes, before deciding that he actually does identify as gay. In the third season, another gay Dalton Academy student is introduced. This student, Sebastian, is depicted as openly gay and thus does not have a 'coming out' moment within the series. He functions primarily as a villain, disrupting the relationship between Blaine and Kurt, and is introduced as a gay character via his immediate desire for Blaine.

The ensemble of queer adolescent characters is completed with the additions of cheerleaders, Brittany and Santana. Their relationship begins subtly and ambiguously, expressing a very different relation to sexuality, identity, adolescent desire and the coming out narrative. An intimate friendship between the two is hinted to be something more midway through the first season when Brittany mentions that if sex were synonymous with dating, she would be dating Santana. This is not explicitly mentioned again until early in the second season, however, the pair go on a date with quarterback, Finn, in the following episode, promising him they will "make out" in front of him. Although equating

The sexual nature of the relationship is confirmed when the two characters are revealed in bed together sharing "sweet lady kisses."

However, the relationship between Brittany and Santana is most often aligned with non-verbal modes of expression such as this hand hold.

Santana rejects the "lesbian" identity label, refusing to acknowledge her feelings for Brittany.

their sexual relationship with the viewing pleasure of a (male) other—much like the lipstick lesbians of 1990s television— this scene gains further meaning as the series progresses, allowing it to be subsequently re-read in different manners. From this point onwards, intimate gestures between Brittany and Santana become markers of the ambiguity of their relationship and the season two episode 'Duets' confirms its sexual nature when they are revealed in bed together, sharing "sweet lady kisses"—"a nice break from all that scissoring" (episode 2.04).

The relationship between Brittany and Santana is continually aligned with non-verbal modes of communication and gestures that occur in the background of performances. It is not uncommon to see images of one girl resting her head on the other's shoulder, hands linked by pinkie finger alone. However, as *Glee* is driven by dialogue and musical performance, this relationship must eventually be subsumed into more expository modes of storytelling. In episode 2.15, eleven episodes later, the two characters are confronted with their feelings. The spacing between these episodes is significant as it allows the relationship to exist ambiguously in the background for much of the first and second season, delaying engagement with the more conventional coming out narrative. As Brittany and Santana tidy themselves after a sexual rendezvous, Brittany tells Santana that she finds their relationship confusing. She says that with her boyfriend, Artie, they "talk about stuff like feelings...because with feelings it's better" (episode 2.15). Santana quickly responds with a denial of the depth of the relationship,

> "Are you kidding? It's better when it doesn't involve feelings. I think it's better when it doesn't involve eye contact...Look, let's be clear here, I'm not interested in any labels unless it's on something I shoplift" (episode 2.15).

They eventually seek guidance from the school sex education teacher, Holly Holliday (Gwyneth Paltrow) who is the first to ask "if either of you think you might be a lesbian." In this scene, the camera moves fluidly around the three women as Santana responds,

> "Yeah. I mean who knows. I'm attracted to girls, I'm attracted to guys. I made out with a mannequin. I even had a sex dream about a shrub that was just in the shape of a person."

Here, the movement of the camera contrasts with the stable, fixed camera of both the previous and following scenes and is suggestive of the sexual fluidity of the characters.

With sentiments that run through the series as a whole, Ms. Holliday suggests they find a song to start a dialogue about their feelings. The idea that music can articulate what words cannot is explicit within this scene and this use of song as emotional expression is common within the musical genre. This is a significant moment within the Brittany and Santana storyline because until this point the relationship and/or queer desires between these characters had been defined by actions rather than words. In privileging 'doing' over 'saying,' *Glee* differentiates this relationship and these characters from many other queer teen characters, including Kurt, who verbally articulate their feelings before acting on them.
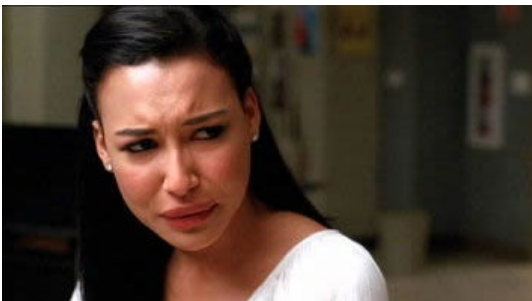
Accompanied by Ms. Holliday, the two characters perform Fleetwood

Holly Holliday (Gwyneth Paltrow) asks Brittany and Santana if they are gay as the camera fluidly moves around them.

Santana, Brittany and Ms. Holliday perform "Landslide" as a means of starting a dialogue. Throughout this number, Ms. Holliday acts as an emotional conduit.

The framing of this musical number gives it the feel of a private conversation between Brittany and Santana.

Mac's "Landslide" for their peers in the glee club. In this number, Brittany and Santana are positioned either side of Ms. Holliday who acts as a physical mediator but also an emotional conduit. The performance begins with Ms. Holliday in the centre of the frame with Santana and Brittany, slightly out of focus, to her sides. The camera slowly pans, refocusing and reframing Santana as the focal point as Ms. Holliday sings the opening lines—"And I saw my reflection on the snow covered hill." We see Santana take a deep breath and look in the direction of Brittany. With the lyric, "When a landslide brought me down," the camera reverses, cutting to Brittany, her expression concerned and questioning. The camera then sweeps across the room whilst Ms. Holliday sings the beginning of the following line—"Can the child in my heart..."— She is joined by Santana for the remainder of this verse in which Santana is depicted as singing to Brittany rather than to the audience—"...rise above? /Can I sail through the changing ocean tides? /Can I handle the seasons of my life?" All three characters come together for the chorus— "Well I've been afraid of changing 'cos I built my life around you"—which builds to the climax of the performance: Santana's solo lyric, "But time makes you bolder, children get older/ I'm getting older too." Returning to the camera positioning of the first verse, Ms. Holliday sings the majority of the remainder of the song. With the lyric, "Well if you see my reflection in the snow covered hills/ Well maybe/ Well maybe..." the camera orbits the three performers, showing their backs in the foreground and the audience in the background, attentively watching. Until this point, the framing of the performance makes it feel like a private conversation. However, this sweeping shot of the choir room is a reminder of the performativity and public nature of this musical number.

For a performance, this number expresses a remarkable interiority. The lyrics of the song are clearly at the surface and of great importance to this dramatic situation, conveying an anxiety about coping with the inevitable changes of life. However, it is not Brittany or Santana that articulate these words as it Ms. Holliday, the conduit through which emotion is conveyed, who vocally performs the majority of the song. Beneath the lyrics are the gestures: deep intakes of breath, sighs, longing or questioning looks, tears, and of course, facial expression as Brittany and Santana begin their dialogue by literally singing through Ms. Holliday. At the conclusion of the performance, as the audience applaud, Santana sniffles and wipes the tears from her eyes. Brittany asks, "Is that really how you feel?" and Santana responds, "uh huh, yeah," as she gets up from her seat and hugs Brittany tightly, clinging to her slender frame. Almost immediately, however, Rachel comically interjects, "Can I just applaud this trio for exploring the uncharted world of Sapphic charm? Brava, brava." Although the performance of "Landslide" may be considered Santana's first step toward coming out, her response to this comment acts as an explicit rejection of a specific, 'lesbian' identity and of conventional modes of coming out.

> **Santana**: Look, just because I sang a song with Brittany doesn't mean you can put a label on me. Is that clear?

Despite this immediate rejection, after the performance of "Landslide," another coming out moment is enacted as the dialogue between Brittany and Santana commences,

Close ups of the expression-filled faces of both Brittany and Santana reflect a remarkable interiority to this scene.

At the end of the performance, Santana rejects conventional modes of coming out.

The dialogue between Brittany and Santana commences as Santana reveals her love for Brittany.

Santana: Can we talk?
Brittany: But we never do that.
Santana: Yeah I know… But I wanted to thank you for performing that song with me in Glee Club because it made me do a lot of thinking. [Smiling as she takes a deep breath] What I've realized is why I'm such a bitch all the time. I'm a bitch because I'm angry. I'm angry because I have all of these feelings. Feelings for you, that I'm afraid of dealing with because I'm afraid of dealing with the consequences. And Brittany, I can't go to an Indigo Girls concert, I just can't…
Brittany: I understand that.
Santana: Do you understand what I'm trying to say here?
Brittany: Not really…
Santana: I want to be with you but I'm afraid of the talks and the looks. I mean, you know what happened to Kurt at this school.
Brittany: But honey, if anybody were to ever make fun of you, you would either kick their ass or slash them with your vicious, vicious words.
Santana: [sniffs] Yeah, I know but… still I have to accept… that I love you. I love *you* and I don't want to be with Sam or Finn or any of those other guys. I just want you. Please say you love me back. Please. (episode 2.15)

While this dialogue and the preceding musical performance are Santana's first experiences of coming out, they are not a "self-conscious taking-on of a new, specific identity" (Davis 131). What is emphasized in these coming out moments is rather an anxiety about feelings, intimacy and love which provides an interesting contrast with *Glee's* earlier depiction of a character's first experience of coming out. Kurt's first articulation of his sexuality *was* a claim of a "new, specific identity" (Davis 131), an identity that he softly, timidly whispered to Mercedes, "I'm gay." Santana, however, explicitly rejects all things carrying 'lesbian' connotations, particularly The Indigo Girls.

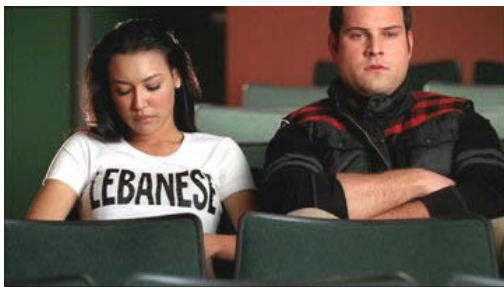*Glee* suggests that being out involves more than a single coming out moment. In this scene from the first season Kurt feigns heterosexuality because he feels that being openly gay has threatened his relationship with his father.

The Glee Club perform Lady Gaga's "Born this Way" whilst wearing t-shirts expressing the things that they are most self-conscious about.

Santana sits at the back of the auditorium, literally wearing her sexuality across her chest in big black letters.

We may consider Sue Sylvester's comment in the season two episode 'Rumours,' "Once a story is out, it's out forever. You can't put it back in," as an allegorical comment about coming out as it is represented in contemporary popular culture. Coming out is often discussed in terms that emphasize it as a fixed, historical action, a formative moment that happens just once. The implication of this is the suggestion that being 'in' or being 'out' are the only definitive options, and that once 'out' is selected and publically declared there is no going back.

However, *Glee* reminds us that coming out should instead be discussed as an ongoing process, presenting its characters with more options than a simple in/out dichotomy and suggesting that being out is far more complex than coming out once. Indeed, after coming out to his father early on in the first season Kurt feigns heterosexuality for an episode, going on a date with Brittany, when he feels that being openly gay has threatened his relationship with his seemingly conservative father. In addition to this, Santana is portrayed throughout the second season as being out to Brittany but continuing to date boys as cover.

Coming out, for Santana, does not involve a single utterance of "I'm a lesbian" but rather entails a series of tentative steps "out of the flannel closet" (episode 3.07) that are followed by panic and immediate return to the safeness of heterosexual relationships. However, Santana does slowly come to a state of self-acceptance that does not rely on the public announcement of her sexuality. This is particularly evident in the episode "Born this way" in which the Glee Club perform Lady Gaga songs wearing t-shirts expressing the things they are most self-conscious about—"BROWN EYES," "NOSE," "LIKES BOYS," "CAN'T DANCE." This episode concludes with a shot of Santana sitting in the back of the auditorium watching her friends perform and wearing her sexual identity plastered across her chest in big black letters. Her t-shirt reads "LEBANESE," a delightful mix up with words courtesy of Brittany, and although Santana does not perform with the group, the importance of this scene is the emphasis on the gesture of simply wearing the t-shirt.

Highlighting the limits of the more typical coming out narrative, Santana remains resistant to conventional modes of coming out despite her cautious self-acceptance, refusing to publically declare her sexuality on numerous occasions. In one particular episode, after singing Fleetwood Mac's "Songbird" to Brittany as a means of expressing her "private" feelings—nervously playing with her hands as she sings, "I love you, I love you, I love you like never before."—Brittany questions, "Why couldn't you sing that to me in front of everyone?" to which Santana, wiping the tears from her eyes, replies, "No, not yet, I'm not ready for that type of [pause] public announcement" (episode 2.19). However, in the third season, Santana's sexuality becomes exactly that: a public announcement. After viciously verbally bullying Finn in the hallway, he retorts, "why don't you just come out of the closet?" Another student overhears this and Santana's sexuality is eventually employed in a political smear campaign against Coach Sylvester. When alerted to this, she bursts into tears and runs out of the room, crying, "I haven't even told my parents yet."

In the following scene, Santana and her friends perform a mash-up of Adele's "Someone like You" and "Rumour has it" whilst a number of other students look on. After the first verse of the song, there is a significant pause where Santana should be singing. Filmed side-on, she appears caught in inarticulateness, unable to speak. Throughout this number, the camera work begins conservatively but becomes increasingly wild. Employing an emotional rather than physical point of

Santana continues to reject a public announcement of her sexuality, performing this song to Brittany as a means of expressing her "private feelings"

Coming out is represented as a series of tentative steps. In this scene, Santana and Brittany hold hands underneath a napkin at a restaurant.

Finn outs Santana in the hallway at school.

Santana's sexuality becomes a public announcement as it is used in this political

view, fast edits are coupled with tracking shots, reframing each of the characters multiple times throughout the number and reflecting Santana's fragile mental state. As the performance progresses, the camera lingers on the emotion on Santana's face, and at the conclusion of the number Santana notices Finn whispering something to Rachel. She jumps from the stage and demands to know what he said.

> **Finn**: I said I thought you were great.
> **Santana**: [shakes her head] You're lying.
> **Rachel**: No, he literally just said that.
> **Santana**: Did you tell her too? Everyone's going to know now. Because of you.
> **Finn**: The whole school already knows. And you know what? They don't care—
> **Santana**: Not just the school, you idiot. Everyone!
> **Finn**: What are you talking a—
> [Santana slaps Finn as the others watch, shocked] (episode 3.06)

With the character of Santana deprived of her agency, *Glee* offers another variation to the more conventional coming out narrative as depicted by Kurt. Unlike Kurt, Santana does not get to choose the words to articulate herself to her peers. Although featuring a public announcement, Santana's storyline provides an alternative to the coming out narrative that is nothing more than a public announcement, offering glimpses of the emotional consequences of public 'outing' and, again emphasising the complexity of the gradual process of coming out.

In episode 3.07 'I Kissed a Girl' the series deliberately frustrates audience expectations of the coming out narrative with Santana further resisting the typical revelatory coming out. The theme of this episode is "Lady Music" as each of the members of the club sing music "by ladies and for ladies" in support of Santana, reiterating the message that "Glee is about learning how to accept yourself for who you are, no matter what other people think" (Finn, episode 3.07). Literalizing a pedagogical figuration of queerness that is remarkably pervasive within much film and television, Finn introduces Santana's sexuality as the lesson of the week. He emphasizes the intentions behind it,

> "so that you know in this rotten, stinking, mean world that you have at least a group of people who will support your choice to be whoever you want to be. That's it. That's what we're doing here" (episode 3.07).

However, Santana immediately refuses this lesson, quickly retorting, "I don't even get a say in this? Not cool" (episode 3.07).

Whilst this episode was marketed quite heavily as 'Santana's coming out episode' in online press, the coming out narrative is further eschewed as the episode continues. In the typical coming out narrative, the act of the adolescent figure revealing their sexuality to parents and/or friends is positioned as the narrative climax (Bronski; Davis). Although, as Finn points out, "Everyone in this room [already] knows about you and Brittany" (episode 3.07) thus removed the need for a dramatic, revelatory moment. With Santana's peers already aware and supportive of her sexuality the climactic revelation should traditionally involve the act of coming out to parents and any conflict arising from this. However, this does not happen within Santana's storyline. After eventually accepting Finn's lesson, Santana offhandedly remarks, "…I told my parents last night and they were cool with it" (episode 3.07).

This storyline does not completely eschew more conventional modes of coming out, however, as Santana is depicted engaging in a more traditional coming out to a different parental figure, her grandmother. Nevertheless, when this mode of coming out is enacted, it provides another significant variation and contrast to that of Kurt. In significant contrast to Kurt's "I'm gay," a phrase that he says to both his

The camera employs an emotional point of view throughout this performance of "Rumour has It/Someone like you".
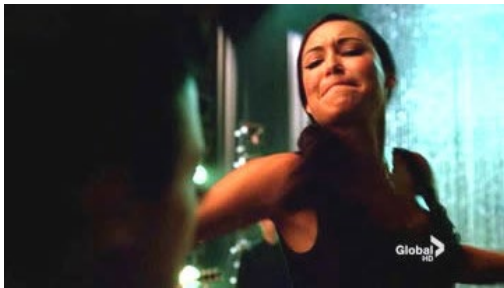
Furious about being removed of her agency, Santana slaps Finn.

Santana eschews the traditional coming out narrative as her peers are already aware and supportive. In this scene, the girls in the Glee Club stand up for Santana when she is being harassed.

peers and family members, Santana refuses to emphasize an identity label, instead articulating her sexuality via feelings of love for another girl. Sitting her grandmother down, Santana softly asserts, "Abuelita, I need to tell you something." Clearly emphasizing her grandmother as a role model, Santana continues, "I've watched you my whole life and you've always been so strong, done exactly what you believed and never cared about what anyone else thought of you" before enacting a more traditional coming out.

> **Santana**: Abuelita... I love girls the way that I'm supposed to feel about boys. It's just something that's always been inside of me and I really want to share it with you because I love you so much. I want you to know me, who I really am. When I'm with Brittany I finally understand what people are talking about when they talk about love. I've tried so hard to push this feeling away and keep it locked inside but every day just feels like a war. I walk around so mad at the world but I'm really just fighting with myself. I don't want to fight anymore. I'm just too tired. I have to just be me... (episode 3.07)

Through this monologue and the prior comment to her grandmother, Santana's 'outness' is not associated with an assertion of a specific identity label but rather with the demonstration of strength, courage, truth and conviction. As she speaks, the camera juxtaposes the action shots of Santana with emotion clearly visible in her expressions and reaction shots of her grandmother appearing emotionless. These contrasting shots are followed by a brief conversation before the grandmother coldly leaves.

> **Abuela**: [coldly] Everyone has secrets, Santana. They're called secrets for a reason. I want you to leave this house. I don't ever want to see you again.
> **Santana**: [Softly] Abuela, you don't...
> **Abuela**: Go. Now.
> **Santana**: I'm the same person I was a minute ago.
> **Abuela**: You made your choice, now I have made mine.
> **Santana**: But why?
> **Abuela**: It's selfish of you to make me uncomfortable, [she says something in Spanish]. The sin isn't in the thing, it's in the scandal when people talk about it aloud.
> **Santana**: So you're saying it would have been better if I would have kept this a secret? [Whispers] Abuela... (episode 3.07)

This negative response from Santana's grandmother is a stark contrast to *Glee*'s earlier positive depiction of Kurt's accepting father. As such it offers a very different portrayal of the reaction of a parental figure to the adolescent's queer revelation. However, this scene is also significant because it portrayed as one of Santana's multiple coming out moments.

As a group of queer adolescent activists have recently noted in a message about queer youth action called "Reteaching Gender and Sexuality," because heterosexuality is the assumed norm, coming out as a means of marking difference from that norm and a means of connecting with a broader queer community is enacted by queer people every day. Speaking a line each, this group of adolescents aim to challenge normative assumptions about coming out and "shift the conversation about gender and sexuality" (www.putthisonthemap.org).

> "I'm so over that. Like the whole, 'when did you come out?' As if it were one time. In the locker room. In the bathroom. On the first day of school. And the second and the third. To my English teacher. To my math teacher. To my science teacher. At my last job interview. Right now. Right now. Right now." (Reteaching Gender and Sexuality)

Most of *Glee*'s queer teenage characters are represented with similar sentiment, challenging the singularity of the traditional coming out narrative as they come out

Continuing to evade the revelatory and climactic coming out, Santana offhandedly remarks that she told her parents, "And they were cool with it."

Santana does, however, enact a more typical coming out to her grandmother in this scene.


The grandmother's negative response acts as a contrast to *Glee*'s earlier depiction of a queer teenager coming out to a parental figure.

a number of times throughout the series. However, it must be noted that the character of Brittany further eschews the coming out narrative, perhaps moving beyond coming out entirely. Beginning as a side character, by the second season Brittany features as one of the central ensemble of characters. However, she does not come out to anyone in this revelatory mode throughout the series. Her encouragement of Santana to sing a love song to her in front of the Glee Club —"Why can't you sing that to me in front of everyone now that Artie and I aren't together?" (episode 2.19)— is indicative of a fundamental difference in the depiction of Brittany in relation to the other queer characters in the series: she does not differentiate between genders and considers all relationships equal. The Brittany character thus appears to be portrayed as bisexual, offhandedly identifying herself as a "bicorn" to Kurt in one episode, however it remains to be seen where the series will take this.

Depicting different teenage experiences of coming out alongside an emphasis on the complexity of coming out as a process rather than a singular action, *Glee* offers what Davis describes as a "complex enunciation of queerness" in place of a unified vision of 'gay' or 'lesbian' or 'queer'. Initially Glee engages a more traditional mode of coming out via the character of Kurt who participates in a revelatory-based coming out storyline. This storyline does, however, challenges the traditional coming-out narrative because it positions coming out as the beginning to a storyline rather than an end. Beyond this, *Glee* offers multiple variations to the coming out narrative from Blaine and Sebastian's immediate openness to Karofsky's struggles with repression and subsequent refusal to come out, to Santana's long and difficult path toward self-acceptance and rejection of the public announcement of her sexuality, to Brittany: the character that seems to move beyond coming out entirely.

It is because of the unique ensemble cast format that *Glee* is able to do this. With previous storylines fresh in the minds of viewers and more than one queer character present at any given time the series cannot represent each of its queer characters as having the same experiences lest it follow the path of dull repetition. Highlighting the ambiguities, the moments of flux and different degrees of out-ness that are so often missing from contemporary popular culture, *Glee* emphasizes that queer adolescent experience cannot be reduced to simple revelation or short, three-episode narrative arc. Through the characters of Kurt, Karofsky, Blaine, Sebastian, Santana and Brittany, *Glee* offers multiple variations on the coming out narrative, depicting the many experiences of queer teenage characters being young and queer and, at times, coming out.
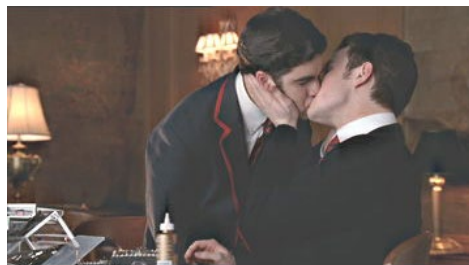
With previous storylines fresh in the minds of viewers, the series cannot represent each of its queer teenage characters as having the same experiences.

Through the queer teen ensemble *Glee* offers multiple variations on the coming out narrative.

[Go to Bibliography page](#)

The character of Brittany seems to move beyond coming out entirely.

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This is Laurie Strode, the Final Girl from Rob Zombie's *Halloween* (2007).The Final Girl is the central female figure of slasher films. She is typically the surviving female who is often pitted against the film's psychopathic killer.


This is Michael Myers from Rob Zombie's *Halloween* (2007). Michael epitomizes the slasher killer who is often portrayed as indestructible and superhuman in strength. He often utilizes phallic weapons to kill off his victims.

Jeepers Queerpers: exploring queer identity in *Jeepers Creepers 2*

by Patrick Bingham

Sexuality is not an uncommon or even reticent discourse within the realm of horror, particularly in the slasher subgenre. Carol J. Clover elaborately deconstructs the "slasher's" gender roles, focusing primarily on the heteronormative positioning of women within this sphere of brutality and chaos. The "Final Girl," Clover's term applied to the last surviving female victim, an ever-present figure in the slasher genre, is "abject terror personified."[1] [open endnotes in new window] She is the character that experiences the wrath of the hyper-masculinized, knife-wielding maniac. Clover claims that she represents a feminist liberator from male domination in society and the bedroom.[2] While slasher film and much of the horror genre have been looked at in these terms of gender identity and feminist thought, very little on horror, especially the slasher film, has been said about its arguable queer undertones. Harry Benshoff seemingly lends that queer interpretation to the slasher genre by isolating the monster—in the monster films from the Golden Age of Cinema—as representative of the Queer "Other."[3] However, the monster of classical horror cinema is as far as his interpretation leads. For the purposes of this paper, I will be extending this notion of the monster queer to the slasher film's killer, hoping to focus a queer lens on the psychosexual slasher film and the subsequent characters/victims within these films.

Additionally, I will utilize Benshoff's definition of Queer, as his definition allows for a fluid and non-conformative understanding of queer identity as "any people not explicitly defining themselves in 'traditional' heterosexual terms."[4] The monster in the slasher flick, the killer, is typically a marginalized figure, usually male, though with exception (*Friday the 13th* (1980), *Happy Birthday to Me* (1981)). That killer arguably exists outside of the heteronormative binary (male/female).[5] [6] I will use the term Queer, rather than homosexual, gay or lesbian, as this term is representative of the multi-faceted, varying identity formations that comprise the slasher film character makeup. Therefore, and in order to offer a queer interpretation of this subgenre, I will be looking at the way in which those queer elements appear in the sequel *Jeepers Creepers 2* (2003).[7] While the original *Jeepers Creepers* (2001) conforms to this queer interpretation, I will focus on the sequel because of the larger character pool and the monster's pursuit of a variety of male characters—versus his pursuit of one male character in the original.[8]
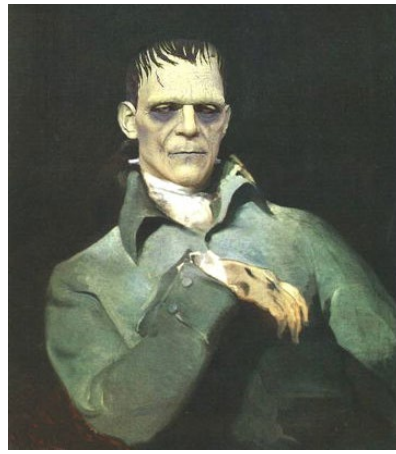
Harry M. Benshoff applied the term 'monster queer' to classic Hollywood monster movies. Frankenstein is employed as an example of a sexually repressed figure whose sexuality has been questioned in Benshoff's work.

This is the killer from *Hell Bent* (2004), which is commonly understood as the 'first gay slasher film'. The killer walks around shirtless, stalking overtly gay representations of stereotypical slasher victims. This killer further perpetuates Benhsoff's notion of the 'monster queer' as his sexuality appears to be ambiguous.

Jeepers Creepers 2 tells the story of a high school basketball team that becomes stranded on a desolate, open country road as the young people are returning to their hometown after a game. As night falls, and the authority figures are killed by the Creeper (the film's slasher figure), the frightened teenagers are picked off one-by-one. As the characters dwindle in numbers, all they can do is wait out the night, for this is the last day of the Creeper's 23 days existence every 23rd year.

In the first section of this paper I will explore the slasher subgenre as it is set out technically and the ways in which slasher films use archetypal representations of masculine identity. This will provide the context for the killer/victim model that is apparent in *Jeepers Creepers 2*, and I will show how that model conforms to Clover's understanding of the "slasher." The second section will look at the Creeper (the slasher himself) and his victims as forms of desire. For this section, I will be using close textual analysis, highlighting the Creeper's actions, facial expressions and positioning throughout the film to provide a better understanding how this killer/victim model expresses desire. Finally, I will employ Mulvey's theory of the "male gaze" the functioning of that desire.

"Slasher" as a subgenre

"Slasher" is often characterized in terms of its narrative construction and stylistic techniques, relying on shadows and penetrative camera work to display the deconstruction of the body as graphically and gratuitously as possible. Clover defines the slasher film as:

> "the slasher (or splatter or shocker or stalker) film: the immensely generative story of a psychokiller who slashes to death a string of mostly female victims, one by one, until he is subdued or killed, usually by the one girl who has survived."[9]

Her definition provides a context for the slasher, or the killer, to be encoded as masculine and attributes victimization to female or arguably feminized victims. Furthermore, that definition considers the character pool, typically comprised of mostly female characters, in terms of pursuit and ranges of power. In other words, power is attributed to the masculine encoded psychokiller, and weakness and inability are lent to the female or feminized victims. Moreover, power shifts occur only as the final victim, "the one girl who has survived," undergoes complete pursuit showing how she can shirk the killer's advances repeatedly. However, these

Friday the 13th (1980) adopted the slasher killer, albeit featuring a female killer in the form of Mrs. Voorhees—Jason's mother.

Happy Birthday to Me (1981) is another slasher film that utilizes the female slasher.

One feature of the slasher figure is his ability to overcome his victims, particularly the female victims. This scene from *Friday the 13th: Part 2* (1981) illustrates the slasher's ability to wield his strength and avenge his mother's death from the previous film.

The terrain in slasher and, particularly in *Jeepers Creepers 2*, can range from the familiar to highly unfamiliar expanses of land. In this

advances do not include an expression of the killer's sexuality. The topic of sexuality in the slasher films has engendered many critical discussions, such as that of Robin Wood who discusses the slasher killer as being sexually incompetent (immature) and consequently repressed.[10] Psychopathic killers have been viewed as incapable of consummating their relationships with the opposite sex, or in the case of this essay, with the same sex.

In this definition, the slasher functions on the level of a killer stalking a slew of potential victims, picking them off one by one. Rick Worland agrees with Clover's definition of the slasher film, moving further to define the range of films as

> "the gory slaughter of contemporary American teenagers by a deranged serial killer in everyday surroundings."[11]

Worland's definition does not connote gender, suggesting that the victims and the killer vary in gender. Adam Rockoff claims that the films operate as

> "a subgenre of horror movies which share similar formal and stylistic elements and adhere to a fairly rigid paradigm… It is a rogue genre, and like the films it encompasses it is tough, problematic and fiercely individualistic. However, there are some distinctive and consistent elements which are prevalent in enough films that a workable, however malleable, definition of the slasher can be formed."[12]

Rockoff's definition focuses on the elements and narrative constructs of this subgenre,"insisting that the genre is "rogue" and difficult to pinpoint. I find that the narrative paradigm as suggested by Clover and Worland, coupled with analyzing the subgenre's strategic camera work and cinematography, provide the best method to identify a "slasher" film.

Finding methods to define the slasher genre as comprehensively as possible provide the viewer with a framework that sets a baseline from which to evaluate films that subscribe to these paradigmatic formulae. Where there is often crossover between the slasher subgenre with other subgenres and, occasionally, other genres, the most substantial elements (i.e. – lighting, first person POV, narrative adherence, etc…) provide the best context to define a film as a slasher. *Jeepers Creepers 2* contains all of the formal aspects of a slasher film, especially in regards to *Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), whereby the psychokiller is not necessarily "living" but still adheres to recognizably human actions and personalities.[13] Furthermore, as these films' killers shift the oftentimes-human killer towards a supernatural representation, the films provide a situation that allows for the killer's apparent indestructibility. Clover affirms this notion, claiming that: "in one key respect, however, the killers are superhuman: their virtual indestructibility."[14] "Indestructibility" supplies an explanation for how the killer is mutable, in that he or she will consistently regenerate form and physicality regardless of whether stabbed, drowned, crushed, decapitated, etc.. Conscious of his/her evident "indestructible" form, it allows the psychokiller to pursue victims continually and without respite.

In the slasher film, setting is just as integral to the narrative as the killer's ability to pursue unsuspecting victims or the inability of that slasher to perish. Rockoff identifies the setting as varying:

> "the location is often a universally recognized place associated with adolescence: summer camp, high school, college, or even the comforting streets of suburbia."[15]

The sense of familiarity and then the destruction of these places' associated comfort suggest a deconstruction of that familiarity. In other words, the positivity harbored in these locations gets fractured by the slasher or psychokiller, creating utter chaos

case, the school bus and victims are on an isolated country road, surrounded by vast fields. These fields serve as barriers to civilisation, where the Creeper must exist because he is merely on the periphery of normal society. As he is representative of the 'monster queer', he can only exist in these spaces because they are devoid of human life, and thus, devoid of scrutiny.

for the unwitting victims. Even when specific locations in the slasher film are unfamiliar, the "characters have come from there."[16] *Jeepers Creepers 2* operates in this manner, where the victims are on the cusp of adulthood but young enough to still warrant some kind of chaperone: the female bus driver; the hyper-masculine, white male coach; and later the paternalistic African American male coach. The young people then get stuck in a broken-down high school bus on the road home. Though this stretch of the road is unfamiliar to them, it is still a route that leads them homeward, evoking a sense of familiarity, enough to elicit in them idle boredom and minimal fear.

The female bus driver in *Jeepers Creepers 2* is portrayed as masculine in her appearance and her personality.

The white male coach is presented as being traditionally masculine, whose body language and attire further suggest this. He can be read as traditionally southern, or country, through his speech and presentation.

The African American coach can be seen to represent the 'ideal', masculine persona apparent in the African American community. He has a strong, powerful build, yet also has a paternalistic personality. Like his colleague, he too is a representation of the traditional masculine form.

The basketball team treats the broken-down bus as a novel, safe space. They and the viewers originally regard it as a reliable means of transportation, representative of security and safe passage.

Eventually that bus becomes their safeguard, a weak fortress that provides the inhabitants a false sense of security. Against the Creeper the bus is nominally protective, but then it becomes a harbinger of victims, similar to Clover's argument concerning The Terrible Place:

> "the house or tunnel may at first seem a safe haven, but the same walls that promise to keep the killer out quickly become, once the killer penetrates them, the walls that hold the victim in."[17]

Clover's Terrible Place recalls Rockoff's claim that the genre's settings evoke familiarity, but she moves further to argue that the teens' entrapment within a particular setting suggests a monstrosity in and of itself.

The wide assortment of male characters in *Jeepers Creepers 2* (2003) demonstrates the

Here is the Creeper, the slasher figure of the *Jeepers Creepers* franchise. It is demonic in

In this film, where entrapment satisfies the slasher, it heightens agony for his/her victims, especially as he/she taunts the victim laughingly through the window or from a position that separates killer and victim enough to present danger but not enact a killing. The Creeper does just that through the windows of the locked bus and through holes he created in the ceiling by an incredible display of strength. Such a display of "penetration" shreds the false sense of security their apparent safe haven should provide.

Much of this display is heightened by the refracted shadows in the bus and the detailed facial features of the Creeper. He gives long, penetrating stares at many of the victims in the bus, selecting which unsuspecting person he will devour or kill. In terms of the slasher genre this portentous display of choosing is embellished by first person point of view shots. As camera angles and the cinematography exemplify the victims' increasingly vicious situation, so too does the camera and cinematography work to enhance the features of the Terrible Place, the slasher and ultimately the Final Girl. Clover defines the Final Girl as the one girl who survives her killer's repeated attacks, the displays of her friends' bodies piling up, and "is presented from the outset as the main character."[18] What most defines the Final Girl is that "abstinence and rectitude evidently give final girls the power to fight back and survive."[19]

While there is a clear-cut Final Girl (Minxie) in *Jeepers Creepers 2*, her ability "to fight back and survive" stem not from her own victimization but that of her friends. Moreover, Minxie exhibits similar supernatural abilities to the Creeper, giving her agency to understand and anticipate the creature/psychopath. This insight comes in the form of a vision, whereby she encounters the deceased victim from the original *Jeepers Creepers*; it's a golden-hued encounter set in a flashback of the initial victim from *Jeepers Creepers 2*.

While there is a female Final Girl who does battle with the masculinized Creeper, the array of victims do not adhere to the traditional model of killer/victim as set out by Clover, and arguably perpetuated by Worland. Though there are primary characters that are female, none of those characters perishes at the hands of the Creeper, except the female bus driver. Rather, those victims who are most sought after are male, virile and, evidently masculine. They consist of an amalgamation of masculinity types: alpha and beta males: hyper-masculine ones, submissive ones, and ones in between. These identity types represent the multi-faceted nature of masculinity, but more importantly, the variants contained within the homosexual community. In turn, this paves way for the Creeper to examine these figures much in the same way that one peruses a potential partner in a public setting. It is therefore uncharacteristic that a killer, whom viewers typically identify as in pursuit of female or feminized characters, to stalk and destroy the lives of those types of male victims.[20] The one female who does die is portrayed as ostensibly masculine, her hair in a tight ponytail, rugged jeans and a blue, button-up shirt covered by a navy blue sweater. From afar, she is indistinguishable from the male coaches and attempts to fix the flattened bus tire herself.

Much like *Jeepers Creepers 2*, *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) redefined the slasher figure, locating him within the conscious and subconscious realms of existence. This film is sometimes considered to have rebooted the slasher film in the early 1980s.

The Creeper is an indestructible figure, regardless of how the victims try to overcome him.
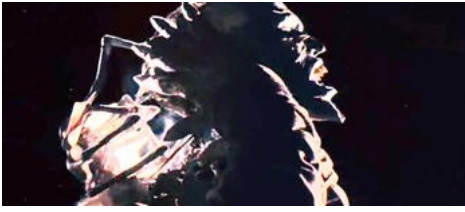
One feature unique to the superhuman slasher figure is its ability to regenerate, as displayed by the Creeper.

After being stabbed through the head with a javelin, the Creeper rips off his head, which will later be restored through the decapitation of one of his victims.

Go to page 2

Representations of desire: killer as queer

In this frame, the students peer out the windows as if their bus is a fortress that will protect them from the outside dangers. Ironically, the bus serves as their 'Terrible Place', which will trap the selected victims to be picked off one-by-one.

As the Creeper in *Jeepers Creepers 2* decidedly picks off his victims, one by one, those victims' body parts become subject to the Creeper's desires. Desire, in this case, functions as a restorative property for the Creeper. He therefore selects his victims based on the most desirable body part (i.e. – the head, the eyes, the hands, etc...) in a process that can only be described as "sniffing out" or "smelling" the desired thing. This occurs because he must harvest these body parts for his 23 years hibernation and also replace parts of himself that are destroyed by his victims. The Creeper is then what Harry Benshoff defines as the "monster queer": a monstrosity that accounts for the sexual Other, oft disrupting heteronormative romance or intentions. As the monster queer disrupts heteronormative romance, he too disrupts heteronormative narratives: the central fragmentation present in the slasher film, further evinced in the fractured body, as the Creeper selects this part or that.[21] [open endnotes in new window]

One of the students becomes an unwitting victim in the 'Terrible Place', losing his head to the Creeper, which the Creeper uses to regenerate himself.

The Creeper, rightly named, has sharp, unnatural features. His teeth are bountiful and malicious, while his skin is sleek and demonic.

As the majority of these victims are men, it appears he is looking to select the most attractive portion of that victim's body to better equip himself. Attractiveness is evident in his selection, because each victim adheres to a specific body type and specific appearance—comparable to what conventional standards defines as attractive. It is therefore suggested that the Creeper selects these victims based on his apparent attraction or "desire" for these male characters. Consequently, the Creeper aspires to be a more attractive form, in spite of his inability to mutate his physical appearance indefinitely – each time he adds a victims' appendage, the appendage is recognizable as the victim's for mere moments and then the monster restores back to his original self.

Physical desire and reconstituting one's self as desirable seem to be the Creeper's intention; and more importantly, that intention is centred onto masculinized victims. In other words, the Creeper is regenerating himself in order to attract potential same-sex sexual partners. Clover previously established that the victims in these films were often portrayed as feminized during their moments of demise. Her initial assumptions regarding the ostensibly masculine slasher, who desired the female victim and disposed of the male would, suggest that a renegotiation of the slasher's desire is in order. Clover argues the point

The Final Girl Minxie in *Jeepers Creepers 2* can only come to understand the Creepers intentions through two dream sequences: the first, which acts as a premonition to their impending situation; and the second, which details what the Creeper is after. She is arguably never the Creeper's ultimate victim; rather, she is a mere nuisance to his desires.

> "that violence and sex are not concomitants but alternatives, the one as much a substitute for and a prelude to the other as the teenage horror film is a substitute for and a prelude to the 'adult' film.'"[22]

Consequently, if the desire for these men is self-indulgent, as it seemingly is for the

Minxie's premonitions reinforce the dire situation of being both stranded and under attack, suggested through her peering out the window of the bus and her encounters with dead males she has never met.

Darry Jenner from *Jeepers Creepers* (2001) appears to Minxie, warning her to turn around and travel no further.

Similarly, the Creeper's initial victim Billy Taggart in *Jeepers Creepers 2* warns Minxie to avoid the field and turn around. Darry and Billy represent the age range of acceptable victims (people of desire), ranging from barely pubescent to virile, young adult males.

Darry demonstrates to Minxie in her second dream sequence what the Creeper intends for his victims, by presenting himself to her once the Creeper has taken the body part he desires.

Creeper, he awaits the perfect "mate" or "partner" and will utilize these victims as identities he decides will better his body. Not using the victims solely for a sexual engagement, he will use violence to satisfy that need.

Identity and gender constructs play an integral role in heteronormative society, as displayed through the characters on the bus: an all male basketball team accompanied by extremely delicate, feminine cheerleaders. Heteronormativity, as defined in *Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Queer Psychology: An Introduction*, refers to "the perceived reinforcement of certain beliefs about sexuality within social institutions and policies."[23] Inherent in these "beliefs about sexuality" are the implications that sexual preference should be heterosexually influenced, that a "family" constitutes a heterosexual coupling, and that marriage is limited to one man and one woman. The film's characters epitomize this definition of heteronormativity, as they build the foundation for the film and for the types of victims the Creeper chooses. Each male victim displays prominent attractive features and represent the varying masculine identities typically encountered in a U.S. high school. Generally, such students might find homosexuality unnatural or monstrous, often bullying or provoking a queer student. Benshoff supports this claim, arguing:

> "certain sectors of the population still relate homosexuality to bestiality, incest, necrophilia, sadomaschism, etc. - the very stuff of classical Hollywood monster movies. The Concepts 'monster' and 'homosexual' share many of the same semantic charges and arouse many of the same fears about sex and death."[24]

This irrational fear regarding the "monster" and the "homosexual" works to create a disingenuous identity formation, which propagates further fear and misunderstanding of queer identity. In other words, the monster is just as feared as the homosexual; and queer identity, because of its apparent monstrosity, becomes an identity construct to mistrust.

Just as the Creeper displays extreme monstrosity, his victims display a similar monstrosity as their ostensible masculinity battles the Creeper's sexually violent advances. In these instances, the characters label the victims as the Creeper's choice, instigating a verbal argument between the trapped boys divisively deciding to kick those he selects off the bus. These singular moments in the film occur as the male victims are trapped in their Terrible Place, with the Creeper looking in at them erotically through the bus's many windows. Desire is at the forefront of this voyeurism, recalling Laura Mulvey's psychoanalytic concept of the male gaze:

> "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly."[25]

While the Creeper does not project his "phantasy on to the female figure," he projects that desire onto the male form, taking in the men's attractive qualities, desiring those qualities overtly and lasciviously. It is thus arguable that in this film a queer gaze has been appropriated, whereby a symbolic order remains intact, but the film renegotiates the traditional gender binary from male/female to male/male. The receiving male is sized up by the camera/the Creeper, emphasizing (a) the character's sexual magnitude and (b) his inferiority to the camera's/the Creeper's gaze. This new queer gaze reflects those same controlling properties and overt, bodily exploitations Mulvey detailed in her theory of the male gaze.

Among the men trapped in the bus, they too recognize this form of desire evinced by the Creeper's sniffing, smirking, toothy-grins and the erotic licking of the bus's rear-facing window. The rear window is situated within the back door, ironically labelled Emergency Exit. "Back door" is a common euphemism for "buttocks" or "anus"; however, it is even more suggestive of anal intercourse. With the monster queer peering in through this "back door," going so far as to lick it, it would suggest

While the characters are comprised primarily of male, high school basketball players, there are a few, feminine female characters present, none of whom die by the hands of the Creeper.

The male characters show a range of diversity racially, but physically are well-built, attractive individuals. However, there are present alpha males and ones, who are not the controlling, domineering kind.

that what the Creeper desires is the penetrative areas of the male body: the anus, the mouth, and even the eyes. The camera accentuates these actions using multiple shot reverse-shots to highlight the victims' reaction to the Creeper's highly suggestive, lascivious advances. Consequently, the Creeper's gaze penetrates the bus, evincing his queerness to the passive males within.

His recurring gaze that accentuates his queerness coupled with the act of choosing help to establish the underlying cathexis exhibited by the Creeper's projected desire. In other words, it is his libidinal energy focused onto that male form that shapes the Creeper's determined gaze. These men are unaccustomed to the voyeurism directed onto themselves, as they, arguably and suggestively, direct their gaze onto the female form. It is this shift from active/male to passive/male that propagates further a queer interpretation of the monster and his victims. Moreover, it also provides an instance for the homosexual to renegotiate those power structures related to gender that are constituted and rooted in the patriarchal foundations of Western Society.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues in *Epistemology of the Closet* that as we as humans further subcategorize ourselves into those rigid, restrictive binarisms (hetero/homosexual), we further divide ourselves apart from one another.[26] While she emphasizes the hetero/homosexual binary predicament, she does not focus on any truth labelled out by those subscribing to the "minoritizing" or "universalizing" views of sexuality as she deems their "truths" arbitrary. Rather, her emphasis is on the performative nature associated with minoritizing and universalizing views. In other words, those who view homosexuality and its problems as relevant only to a small set of individuals (minoritizing) would be more inclined to perform homophobic, divisive actions. Thus, this division emphasize how devaluation underpins the monstrosity of the Creeper, because he must exist in a period of "every 23rd spring for 23 days" when he gets to eat.[27] He can only exist in this period of growth and rebirth (suggested by "spring") for a miniscule amount of time, because the construction of his queer identity is contrary to the heteronormative ideal of male desiring female and *vice versa*.[28]

These boys are representative of the ideal, adolescent male prevalent in *Jeepers Creepers 2*. There is very little variation among the characters in terms of sexual appeal. Each boy would represent a facet of the male population deemed attractive.

The Creeper 'sniffs out' what he desires in his victims. In this shot, we see the Creeper's nostrils flaring out as he determines which character(s) will provide him with the most suitable body parts.

Once the Creeper discovers a feature he so desires in a victim, he makes facial and bodily gestures to inform the victim of his choice.

During the Creeper's regenerations, the victims body parts the he takes can be made out as they attach and/or regenerate any wounds the Creeper suffers. In this case, the decapitated boy's head restores the Creeper's damaged one.

The Creeper selects the best feature of his victims in order to better himself. Because he is unable to attain these objects of desire for sexual activity, it is arguable that he takes their best features to recreate the ideal male form for himself.	The Creeper erotically licks the glass on the emergency exit door attached to the back of the bus. This frame demonstrates the overt sexual nature of the scene as the victims are objects of desire; but, also, shows how sexual advances can be used to torment victims further. Moreover, licking the back of the bus is suggestive of licking the penetrative areas of his victims.

Furthermore, his limited active existence provides him with a fragmented population, from which he can select his victims. It is a notion suggestive of the queer community, whereby queer identity is ostracized to the outskirts of heteronormative society. And where their identity constructs are limited, they too have limited partner choices. Similar to that ostracizing, the Creeper must exist outside the cities and towns of modern United States, isolated to the largely unoccupied frontiers of the Midwest. Vast open fields and extensive road provide the setting for *Jeepers Creepers 2*, trapping the victims in the bus within this queer terrain dominated by the Creeper. Though his visibility is obvious to the viewer during periods of sunlight, the victims do not encounter the monster queer until nightfall; only the young boy at the onset of the film encounters the Creeper and meets his demise during the day. Here the film depicts its manifold representations of queer monstrosity, which

> "manages to equate or conflate homosexuality with most…horror film signifiers of depravity: all manner of sex perversion (bestiality, necrophilia, pedophilia), as well as human sacrifice, Satanism, rape, and serial killing."[29]

Once the victims realize their situation and realise they are actually trapped within their safe

Underlying the Creeper's model for selection is the representation of paedophiliac desire and bodily rape, suggested by the younger, on the fringes of barely pubescent, boy and the bus' array of men. Furthermore, Satanism is evoked in that the monster queer looks devilish (i.e. – sharp features, sharp teeth, sharp piercing eyes and a demonic aura), suggestive of a supernatural being, a demonic figure. This link between archaic assumptions regarding queer identity as monstrous with the victimization of men epitomizes the monster's assumed identity formation as queer. In addition, it provokes the specific religious ideology regarding homosexuality and queer identity, where homosexuals are doomed sinners,

space, they quickly turn into monsters towards one another. They create a subclass of individuals, dividing themselves into a binary of non-victim/victim, which itself sparks heated arguments and leads to irrational, dangerous decisions.

This divisive categorisation and subjugation recall the racial prejudice of the 50s and 60s, demonstrated through the argument between the white and the African American segment of the team.

The vitriol displayed on the teammates face further emphasizes the racial tensions, heightened by the impending danger. Moreover, these racial tensions are suggestive of the prejudices and tensions accorded to the LGBT community presently.

Finally, the Creeper's days are up and his visibility must end. As suggested through the opening sequences, he will return the next 23rd spring for 23 days. This image, however, recalls the lynching in the southern states as they too were commonly used as deterrents for African Americans.

separated from heaven and ostracized to hell.

Given that the Creeper escapes the fringes of hell and with agency unwittingly consumes his male victims, Christian ideology and Judeo-Christian Western society are placed at odds against an indestructible force. Where the monster queer is indestructible (he is stabbed multiple times in his body and his face), he becomes a force that Western society cannot overcome. Just like the pleasures Christianized Western societies cannot overcome, the monster queer represents that part of queer identity that accepts his/her sexuality and does not shirk the desires for the [same-sex] body. Sedgwick notes:

> "Christian tradition...had tended both to condense 'the flesh' (insofar as it represented or incorporated pleasure) as the *female* body and to surround its attractiveness with an aura of maximum anxiety and prohibition."[30]

Whereas these traditions elaborated the female form as an indicator of pleasure (or the flesh), queer identity labels as the indicator of pleasure the same-sex body. Queer identity constructs, therefore, go against heteronormative ideals to fetishize the opposite sex, but also disregard any sense of maximum anxiety or prohibition of desire. Moreover, as the Creeper consumes his victims' body parts, he is in turn giving in to the flesh, but he is also working to recreate his own form into that idealized *male* figure.

The Final Girl (Minxie) works to combat the Creeper's intention to turn her male friends into a piece of himself, fighting back violently and forcefully. Her position in *Jeepers Creepers 2* does not mean she will be saved by a patriarchal figure, rather she will combat the monster queer herself, demonstrating her agency and position within this chaotic sphere. In other words, she, like the "monster queer," is fighting for her own existence in the hostile, chauvinistic world into which she was born. Clover defines this ending as one of two possible types:

> "She alone looks death in the face, but she alone also finds the strength either to stay the killer long enough to be rescued (ending A) or to kill him herself (ending B)."[31]

Being rescued versus her ability to kill him herself gives the Final Girl the cogency to reckon with her own "monsters"; and in this case, the monster threatens her future within the male/female, hetero/homosexual binaries laid out by heteronormativity. Furthermore, she becomes the independent figure to which the male victims can turn as they seek asylum, engraining her future role of matriarch. Minxie, therefore, becomes the Creeper's own monster, as they both struggle to overcome one another. He must continue his pursuit of male victims, his pursuit for existence, while she must struggle against him to guarantee and maintain her status within patriarchal Western society.

At odds with existence, the Final Girl and the monster queer operate within a sphere of predetermined power structures: an evident hierarchy of male/female, hetero/homosexual and normative/non-normative identity formations. This suggests that these binaries are institutionalized constructions, positioning the first identity in the binary in the active role and the secondary position in the passive. To support such a claim, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues:

> "the shapes of sexuality, and what *counts* as sexuality, both depend on and affect historical power relationships."[32]

In other words, the "monster queer's" sexuality and the Final Girl's sexuality are at odds with one another, just as the charaters are at odds with one another for existence and acceptance.

Ultimately the Creeper is overcome not at the hands of any one person but because of his limited time to scavenge his isolated setting for potential victims. Moreover, the film's ending shows the Creeper tied up in a barn, recalling the bleak images of

Conversely, the image of the old white man sitting with a weapon similar in size and shape to a shotgun illustrates society's unwillingness to let change occur and allow for visibility in civilized society, rather than on the periphery. The strung up image of the Creeper and the old man depict that conservativism towards, in this case, homosexuality.

KKK hangings of African Americans in the rural South. And as the Creeper awaits his next spring, so awaits an aged man, ready to combat this "monster queer." I find the film's ending suggestive of the queer awaiting for his/her acceptance and the patriarch waiting to deny that acceptance whenever need be.

In conclusion, I have looked at the ways in which the slasher film has been defined, detailing its specific proponents (as informed by Clover's work), relating the film *Jeepers Creepers 2* to its generic conventions and narrative structure. Furthermore, I have attempted to extend Harry Benshoff's definition of the monster queer in terms of the slasher film. By looking at the slasher in terms of sexuality and not just gendered power structures, I hope to expand Clover's gender-based assumptions to consider the slasher film's relationship with (homo)sexuality.

While I have employed a narrative approach with elements of textual analysis, this essay did not permit the space to examine fully the critical reception and/or queer readings of the film that could have further substantiated the analysis. One could also undertake a more detailed exploration of the director's own sexuality and his widely publicized paedophilic scandal from the late 1980s. Further research on sexuality and the horror film may focus on queer appropriations of the genre both historically and contemporaneously. This will allow for a more thorough examination of the queer undertones in film narratives, especially in horror. It may also open up debates around film spectatorship including the possibility that the gay community has identified with the figure of the monster in a multitude of ways, something that requires much more consideration.

This frame, at the onset of the film, provides a spatial and temporal framework for the viewer to negotiate the Creeper's liminality.

As the bus breaks down on the endless road, the Creeper takes advantage of this desolate space and the victims entrapment within the wide open.

Moreover, if the Creeper can only exist within 23 days ever 23 years his advances towards objects of desire must be hyperbolised, because he will only be visible under these terms.

Sex and food are commonly linked as two naturally human actions. If the Creeper exists in this short period, and cannot perform sexually (assumed through its positioning as the psychotic, slasher figure), then the only alternative for a hyper-repressed figure is to victimise and brutalise.

Go to Notes page

Notes

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6. *Happy Birthday to Me*. Dir: J. Lee Thompson. Columbia. 1981.

7. *Jeepers Creepers 2*. Dir: Victor Salva. United Artists. 2003.

8. *Jeepers Creepers*. Dir: Victor Salva. United Artists. 2001.

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11. Worland, Rick. Chapter 10 "*Halloween* (1978): The Shape of the Slasher Film" in *The Horror Film: An Introduction*: (Malden, MA: Blackwell 2007), pg. 227.

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13. *Nightmare on Elm Street*. Dir: Wes Craven. New Line Cinema. 1984.

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16. Ibid., Rockoff, pg. 10.

17. Ibid., Clover, pg. 31.

18. Ibid., Clover, pg. 39.

19. Ibid., Worland, pg. 229.

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21. Ibid., Benshoff.

22. Ibid., Clover, pg. 29.

23. Clarke, Victoria; Soja J. Ellis; Elizabeth Peel; and Damien W. Riggs. "Prejudice and Discrimination" in *Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Queer Psychology: An Introduction*: (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University 2010), pg. 120.

24. Ibid., Benshoff, pg. 3.

25. Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" in *Media and Cultural Studies: Key Works*. Durham, Meenakshi Gigi and Douglas M. Kellner (Eds.): (Malden, MA: Blackwell 2006), pg. 346.

26. Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Epistemology of the Closet*: (London, England: University of California 2008), pg. 9.

27. Ibid., *Jeepers Creepers 2*.

28. This could be reflective of the Algonquian folklore regarding the Windigo/Wendigo. See Wonderley's *At the Front of the Marvelous* (2009) for more detailed interpretations of the folkloric Windigo narratives.

29. Ibid., Benshoff, pg. 240.

30. Ibid., Sedgwick, pg. 136.

31. Ibid., Clover, pg. 35.

32. Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. (New York, NY: Columbia University 1985), pg. 2.
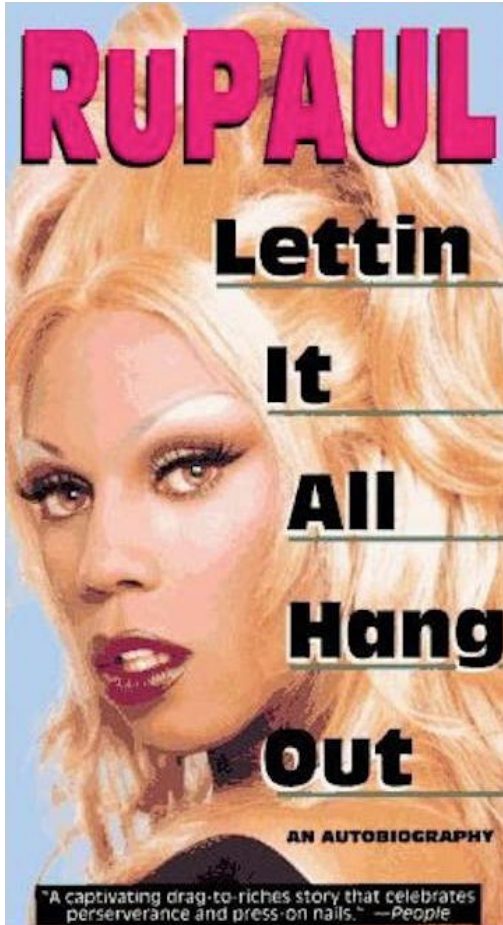
RuPaul's memoir *Lettin It All Hang Out* (1996).

RuPaul's Drag Race as meta-reality television

by Nicholas de Villiers

RuPaul's Drag Race billboard

"Drag constitutes the mundane way in which genders are appropriated, theatricalized, worn, and done; it implies that all gendering is a kind of impersonation and approximation … gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original."
—Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination"

"I was a child of television. … I instinctively knew just how to turn the volume up, how to pitch myself, and how to speak in sound bites. In short, I knew how to speak the language of television. Fluently."
—RuPaul, *Lettin It All Hang Out*

A brief U.S. history of previous crossovers of drag queens into (relatively) mainstream media with mixed gay-straight audiences:

The Queen (1968): a documentary of the Miss All-America Camp Beauty Pageant in New York, 1967. Crystal LaBeija (Legendary Mother of the House of LaBeija) walks off stage after she receives third runner up.
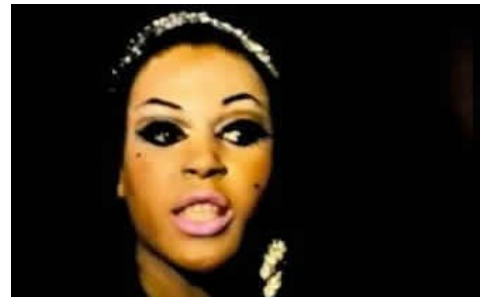
The Queen: Crystal LaBeija accused the organizers of bias. The panel of judges was originally supposed to include Andy Warhol.

Drag queen legend Holly Woodlawn in Andy Warhol/Paul Morrissey's *Trash* (1970). Classic Hollywood director George Cukor started a write-in campaign to get Holly Woodlawn nominated for an Oscar for Best Supporting Actress in 1970.

Divine in John Waters's *Pink Flamingos* (1972).

Divine in John Waters's *Hairspray* (1988), in the role that Divine believed would prove that he was a character actor, because no drag queen would let herself look so frumpy.
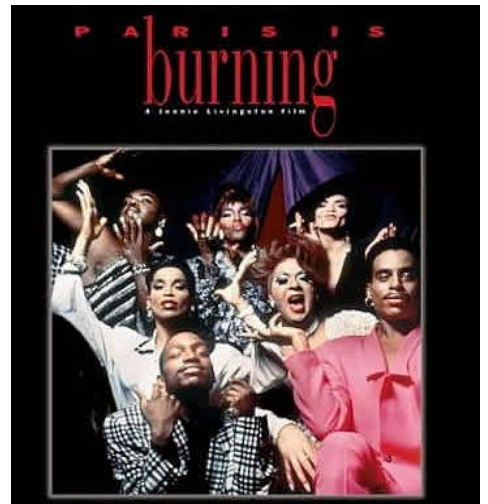
Paris Is Burning (1990): Jennie Livingston's documentary about drag balls in New York City 1987–1989, starring Pepper LaBeija as the current Mother of the House of LaBeija.

America's next top drag queen

The Insider (2008) introducing the launch of *RuPaul's Drag Race* (2009). ...

An October 2008 segment of the entertainment news show *The Insider* introducing the launch of the first season of *RuPaul's Drag Race* (first aired February 2, 2009) begins with the announcer saying,

> "Move over Tyra and *America's Next Top Model*, there is a brand new talent competition hitting the airwaves that is about to turn the rules upside down, because these all male contestants aren't just striking a pose, they are dressing up like women to become America's next top drag queen."

... "Move over Tyra and *America's Next Top Model*." (Pictured: *ANTM* host Tyra Banks)

We then see behind-the-scenes shots of the contestants in the backstage/makeup/workroom area with commentary from RuPaul reassuring reality-TV fans that there will be lots of drama because "we're queens." The contestants' self-introductions are interspersed with footage of RuPaul's "Supermodel (You Better Work)" music video from 1993, thus reminding the audience of RuPaul's earlier moment in the spotlight of mainstream culture. Over shots of the panel of judges, RuPaul explains that they are looking for America's next drag superstar, distinguished by "Charisma, Uniqueness, Nerve, and Talent." We can already sense a bit of RuPaul's subversive sense of humor in smuggling an obscene acronym (C.U.N.T.) onto mainstream television, and RuPaul jokes that no one has come for her title and it is "kind of lonely at the top." (I will use "she/her" to refer to RuPaul in female drag, and "he/his" for RuPaul's "male drag" persona, often including glasses and a mustache). But RuPaul is also strikingly sincere and Oprah-esque when she explains that these are people who have "taken adversity and turned it into something beautiful and powerful." She offers up her version of the drag American dream:

> "a lot of paint and powder, and a positive attitude, high-heels and a dream will take you a long way."

This encapsulates the meritocratic dream of talent-scouting television like *Star Search* and *Miss America* that *The Insider*'s audience also recognizes from reality television shows *America's Next Top Model*, *American Idol*, and *Project Runway*.

What we don't see in *The Insider*'s profile is RuPaul in dapper suit-wearing "male drag" (rather than "out of drag"—a state reserved for the contestants). RuPaul famously declared,

> "You're born naked and the rest is drag." (*Lettin It All Hang Out*, viii).

"Reality Show" genre classification (subcategory: "talent competition").

Looking for America's next drag superstar: "Charisma, Uniqueness, Nerve, and Talent."

The panel of judges (resembling *America's Next Top Model*, *American Idol*, and *Project Runway*), including Santino Rice from *Project Runway*.


"Born Naked, The Rest Is Drag": RuPaul in both female and male drag.

This concept of drag as revealing the imitative structure of gender (including normative heterosexual gender, not just lesbian, gay, and drag "role playing") will be recognizable to readers of Judith Butler's influential essay "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" (though many forget that Butler credits this insight to Esther Newton's anthropological study of drag, *Mother Camp*). Butler, however, has since downplayed the example of drag (as conscious or voluntary performance) in her idea of gender performativity (perhaps understandably, since many use the word "performative" when they mean "performancy").[1] [open endnotes in new window] But I want to take RuPaul's conscious — and perhaps unconscious — performances seriously. I will go on to argue that RuPaul's multiple personas offer a kind of metacommentary on talent contest reality television conventions and specifically the roles of Tyra Banks and Tim Gunn from *America's Next Top Model* and *Project Runway*. RuPaul's television performances offer "readings" of their performances, as well as revisions of her own iconic "Supermodel of the World" persona. *RuPaul's Drag Race* is thus a form of "meta-reality television."

Werner Wolf has identified a "metareferential turn in contemporary arts and media" in two edited volumes that speculate about works that call attention to themselves as artifacts (metafiction, metacinema, metatelevision). Wolf defines "metaization" as

"the movement from a first cognitive, referential or communicative level to a higher one on which first-level phenomena self-reflexively
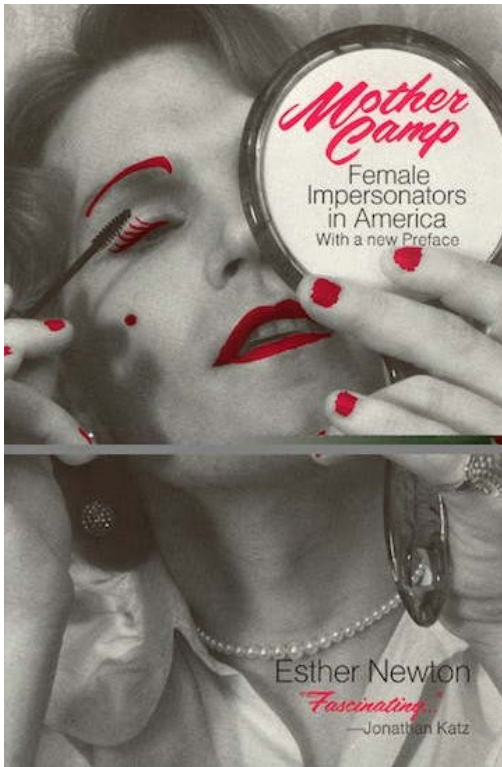
Esther Newton's *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (1979).

become objects of reflection, reference and communication in their own right" (*Metareferential Turn*, vi).

This is generally associated with a kind of intellectual, critical, and distancing reflexivity, but certain contributors to the edited volumes (including myself on "metahorror" films) suggested that metareference in popular media does not necessarily conflict with the immersive enjoyment of the text by the audience, and can act as a kind of flattering wink to the savvy fan. In what follows, I will examine both the intertextual and metatextual elements of *RuPaul's Drag Race* in relation to *ANTM* and *Project Runway* and reality television more generally, but I will also look further back in time than *The Insider* to gauge the impact of Jennie Livingston's 1990 drag documentary *Paris Is Burning* on RuPaul's early-90s persona (for example, the lyrics on her album *Supermodel of the World*), the format and vocabulary of *RPDR*, and audience reception of RuPaul's show.

Much of RuPaul's dialogue is borrowed from the drag ball scenes in *Paris Is Burning*. Sometimes this borrowing takes the form of direct quotation, for instance: RuPaul tells Santino, a judge on RPDR who also competed on *Project Runway*, to "shake the dice and steal the rice" (which may have been slang at the time of *Paris Is Burning*, but is recognizable as a snippet of dialogue from the MC in the film, along with Venus Xtravaganza's idiolect also quoted by RuPaul: "between me down there"). Sometimes it involves revision and re-inflection: "Xtravaganza" becomes "Eleganza," "Psychological" becomes "Biological," etc. This kind of mutation is characteristic of a "meme" whereby culture is disseminated through fan communities and the Internet. I will end with some speculation about the effects of new media on our sense of "drag community" and "gay community."
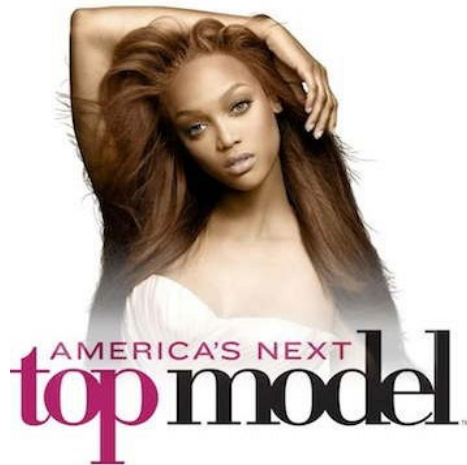
America's Next Top Model hosted by supermodel Tyra Banks.

Project Runway mentor Tim Gunn in the workroom.

Venus Xtravaganza demonstrates "reading" in *Paris Is Burning*. RuPaul frequently quotes her and her inflections, along with quoting the MC of the balls in the film.

America's Next Top Model panel of judges.

To start with *The Insider*'s comparison: does *RPDR* turn "the rules" of *America's Next Top Model* upside down? Other than the gender (or genders) of the contestants, the contest itself is relatively similar: each week the host announces a specific challenge (with some coaching) that tests the modeling and spokesmodeling skills of the competitors, usually producing an artifact ("your best shot" taken by a celebrity photographer; a short promotional video), and a runway performance/ interview in front of a panel of judges chosen for their industry experience who offer their critiques, presided over by a successful spokesmodel.

ANTM: judging a model.

An *ANTM* meme joking about Tyra's egotism.

The final prize competed for is also similar: a modeling contract, an advertising contract, the opportunity to appear in a top magazine, and the title/crown. In *ANTM*, Tyra Banks (a "top model" who is also the executive producer of the show) reveals one-by-one the photographs of the contestants that have not been eliminated, saying,

> "Congratulations. You are still in the running towards becoming America's Next Top Model."

The first-called contestant receives a small prize and sometimes an advantage in the next challenge, and the final two contestants left standing are usually given further criticisms before Tyra breaks the suspense by revealing who will stay and who must pack their things and leave the show. One major difference is that the decision of who stays and who goes is made by the panel in *ANTM* whereas the panel of judges on *RuPaul's Drag Race* play only an advisory role, since RuPaul reserves the privilege of making the final decision herself of who will "Shantay, you stay/Sashay away."

RuPaul's decision is allegedly based on the "Lip-Sync for Your Life" performances of the bottom two queens. In asserting her power (often calling the panel of judges to "SILENCE" dramatically) and her judgment by fiat, RuPaul parodies and exposes the pretense of democratic voting by a panel of experts (since the open secret of reality TV competitions is that the producers have a say in who stays because they are "good television"). RuPaul also highlights the way *ANTM* is really Tyra's show (Tyra's ability to make everything about her through aggressive empathy can also be seen in her successful Oprah-esque daytime talk show). This megalomania ("bring in my girls") and narcissism is also parodied in the recap ("RuCap") episodes of *RuPaul's Drag Race* where the most memorable outfits are all RuPaul's own runway appearances.

So, while *RuPaul's Drag Race* does not follow the exact pattern of *ATNM*, it frequently refers to Tyra ("the other Tyra") and borrows several aspects of the format and trademarks of Tyra's show: on *ANTM*, the challenges are announced by "Tyra Mail" (usually rather enigmatically, to create a guessing-game for the contestants); RuPaul revises this as "You've Got She-Mail": a video appearance of RuPaul in female drag announcing the challenge (again somewhat enigmatically). She-Mail is both an appropriation of Tyra's device and a reappropriation of the offensive "she-male" label for drag queens (likewise for RuPaul's use of "ladyboy," although the show is ambivalent *at best* about transsexuality, as seen in multiple arguments between contestants). Another direct link between *RPDR* and *ANTM* is the controversial winner of *RPDR* season 3, Raja (Sutan Amrul), who was a makeup artist on *ANTM*. *ANTM* can also be connected to *Paris Is Burning* through the guest appearances of voguing-coach Benny Ninja of the famous House of Ninja. When Tyra invited the notoriously homophobic Westboro Baptist Church family (known for protesting with "God Hates Fags" signs at funerals) on her talk show, they accused her of being a "Fag Enabler." Beyond the repulsive homophobia intended by this comment, I think it is a brilliant description of the positive work of her enterprise and her collaboration with effeminate gay men of color (Mr. Jay and Miss J).

When RuPaul enters the workroom to announce the mini-challenge on *RPDR*, he is in "male drag" (a tailored suit, what he calls "executive realness" in *Lettin It All Hang Out* [x–xi], borrowing a term from the drag balls of *Paris Is Burning*). This is where the show more closely resembles *Project Runway*, and RuPaul as a man resembles the charming and dapper gay mentor Tim Gunn at Parsons The New

School for Design. RuPaul's tone in the workroom is less imperious, and he focuses on coaching the contestants and getting them to talk through their costume ideas for the main theme challenge, while reminding them how things might play out on the runway (but instead of predicting the criticisms of Heidi Klum, Michael Kors, and Nina Garcia, RuPaul in female drag is the one to impress, so the coaching is slightly schizophrenic).

Unlike *ANTM* and *Project Runway*, we rarely get to see the contestants of *RPDR* in any kind of dorm-room/apartment/non-studio setting, rather, the show emphasizes the conventional reality television distinction between public and private through scenes in the workroom (the "You-Better-Work-Room"). The genre of reality television is in fact known for eroding the distinction between public and private, since at least *MTV's The Real World*, which introduced the private "video confessional" format but developed drama around making intimate cohabitation public. Often the contestants are in a state of semi-undress, and the show emphasizes the process and the work that goes into "the transformation" from "gentlemen" to "women"—tucking, padding, "cooking" makeup, etc. (a major focus of RuPaul's autobiography and more recent style guide, *Workin' It: RuPaul's Guide to Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Style*, which itself resembles *Tim Gunn: A Guide to Quality, Taste, and Style*). We also see this emphasis on the "work" of drag in challenges where the queens must give non-queens makeovers to look like them (butch women, jocks, older gay men, straight fathers).

Mr. Jay Manuel (creative director) and Miss J. Alexander (runway expert) from *America's Next Top Model*.

Jorge Luis Flores Sanchez/Nina Flowers's drag transformation in the "You-Better-Work-Room."

Semi-undress "backstage."

A meme from *RuPaul's Drag Race: Untucked*.

The promise of getting to see "behind the scenes" is one of the major draws of reality television, and explains the appeal of the online supplement to *RuPaul's Drag Race* "Under the Hood" which was replaced by a full half-hour program *RuPaul's Drag Race: Untucked* in season two. *Untucked* shows the contestants in the "Interior Illusions Lounge" critiquing each other and the judges while preparing for the final "Lip-Sync for your Life" portion of the show. This provides viewers at home the chance to speculate along with the contestants about who will be in the bottom two, who is being two-faced, what allegiances are forming, who will be in the final three, etc. As John Fiske and John Hartley note in *Reading Television*, competition shows like dance contests with a panel of judges, quiz shows, and sports broadcasts allow the audience at home to vicariously participate

Contestant Sharon Needles impersonating judge Michelle Visage.

and identify with the roles of both competitor and judge (146). *Untucked* provides a further meta-level where the contestants (and audience) can judge the judges (Santino, Merle, Michelle Visage, celebrity guests—Sharon Needles's impression of Michele Visage in "the Snatch Game" during season four was perhaps the most inspired "read"). This also makes us feel even more like "insiders" to the proceedings, thus reinforcing a sense of fan community.

Go to page 2

To top   Print version   JC 54   *Jump Cut* home

The insider

Paris Is Burning director Jennie Livingston, promoting her documentary on *The Joan Rivers Show*.

This distinction between "insider" and "outsider" is also a central problem for Jennie Livingston's film *Paris Is Burning*. Bell hooks has criticized Livingston for not being reflexive enough about what it meant for her as an outsider (a white lesbian) to ask black and Latino drag queens and transsexuals to explain themselves and their terminology to outsiders (mainstream audiences). Hooks accuses Livingston of turning a "ritual" with meanings discernible to insiders into a "spectacle" for outsiders (150–51). In *The Queening of America: Gay Culture in Straight Society*, David Van Leer problematizes this in/out distinction and argues for a shift of emphasis from gay narrative visibility to gay speech:

> "My analysis … focuses on the language itself, turning from the visible to the verbal, from homosexual narratives to homosexual dictions, rhythms, rhetorics. The sexual character of language is rarely direct, and post-Stonewall criticism has occasionally stigmatized such writing as 'closeted.' But just as invisibility does not impede all forms of speech, so the refusal to identify one's personal interests can facilitate other kinds of gay statements." (19)

"Reading is the real art form of insult."—Dorian Corey

The value of such indirect language can be heard in *Paris Is Burning* when Dorian Corey and Venus Xtravaganza explain "Reading" and "Shade." Corey explains that if you are both black queens, you can't call each other "black queen" as a slur. Instead, *reading* involves finding a flaw ("your ridiculous shape, your tacky clothes, your saggy face") or getting in a good crack at someone (Venus: "Touch this skin, honey, touch all of this skin. You just can't take it, you're just an overgrown orangutan"). *Shade* is even subtler, whereby, "I don't have to tell you you're ugly, because you *know* you're ugly" (Willi Ninja also explains that Voguing is a "safe way of throwing shade"). But what is important here is that this is an "art" which is communal, and while its apparent goal or motive is insult and competition, the pleasure is in the game itself (despite heated moments where the MC or judge is accused of being "shady"/"throwing shade," one of the remarkable aspects of the drag balls depicted in *Paris Is Burning* is the rotation and permeability of the roles of contestant, audience member, and judge).

Reading and Shade are in fact closely linked to the African-American rhetorical strategy of "Signifyin(g)" analyzed by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in *The Signifying Monkey* (drawing on earlier work by Claudia Mitchell-Kernan and others), where he argues,

> "Signifyin(g) turns upon indirection" (77).

Venus Xtravaganza "reading."

These verbal strategies are used by adults within African-American communities and taught to children so they can learn how to "hold a conversation" and understand the subtleties of indirection as a rhetorical technique. While I have benefited from such a clarification of terminological definition and use, hooks criticizes this aspect of *Paris Is Burning*: the way it explains black, gay, subcultural terms to "outsiders," in the manner of a conventional ethnography (with inter-titles: READING, SHADE, MOPPING, etc.). But it is important to note that the participants often relate ironically to the "talking heads" format itself. Pepper LaBeija begins the film with "So you want me to say who I am and all that?" and Freddie Pendavis jokes about how a "faggot can pull a stunt and you won't find out until years later" and how he's "a very quiet person," adding "if you believe that,

Marlon Riggs's *Tongues Untied* (1989) demonstrates the related art of being a "Snap!" Diva.

The final inter-title to *Paris Is Burning*: PIG LATIN. [Japanese subtitled version]

you know I own that island over there?" Like Gates's reading of "trickster" figures in the African-American oral and literary tradition, the joke is on the director and viewer who are "outsiders" and lack access to the subtleties of such rhetoric (and may not catch up with the stunt until years later). Van Leer explains that

> "often minorities speak most volubly between the lines, ironically reshaping dialogues the oppressor thinks he controls or even finding new topics and modes of speaking to which the oppressor himself lacks access" (19).

Van Leer in fact objects to Corey's explanation of "Realness" as "passing" since this translates a gay "inside" practice into the dominant language of heterosexism and racism, and the essentialist metaphors of visibility (194).

The epistemological or ethnographic framework is constantly undermined in the game that the participants play with the documentary format itself. The last line of the film is actually a question:

> "So this is New York City and this is what the gay life is all about… Right?"

Livingston herself as a queer filmmaker acknowledges a potential critique of her own film by including as the final intertitle "PIG LATIN," demonstrating a simultaneously exclusive and inclusive mode of speech. Like an ethnographic documentary, *RuPaul's Drag Race* occasionally explains insider terms to outsiders (such as "kai kai": when two drag queens date each other). But it also attempts to illuminate the dynamics of drag community: a complex mixture of competition and collectivity (although competition shows always stress rivalry rather than collectivity). Recalling the drag houses of *Paris Is Burning*, RuPaul acts as "mother" and is sometimes called "mama" by the contestants (whom she refers to as "my girls"). Butler has noted how the drag houses in *Paris Is Burning* point to a resignification of the terms of kinship: mother, father, and children (241). *Paris Is Burning* allows Butler to refine her theory of resignification, iterability, and citationality with regard to gender and kinship in ways that cannot be reduced to voluntarism (including the "voluntarist" view of gender as willed performance that she wanted to distance herself from in *Bodies That Matter*). But I would like to ask what happens to these notions of kinship and community when we leave the ballroom setting and, as consumers, watch *RuPaul's Drag Race* through new media:

- LOGO, a cable-television channel owned by Viacom's Music and Logo Group division with programming/niche marketing geared toward lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender viewers,
- VH1 cable television (where RuPaul had a relatively unsuccessful talk show in the mid-'90s), and
- online streaming video (LOGOonline.com and YouTube, adding further fan "feedback loop" perhaps best exemplified by the extended reviews of *Drag Race* episodes provided by drag queens Isis Mirage and Coco Ferocha on the YouTube channel THROWINSHADE: http://www.youtube.com/user/THROWINSHADE).

Queens of all media

How is queer culture passed on in the age of new media? In many ways *RuPaul's Drag Race* contains the kind of intergenerational tutoring, communication, competition, and transformation of drag occurring between "mothers" and "children" in the drag world depicted within *Paris Is Burning*—and occurring between that documentary film and its diverse audiences. *RuPaul's Drag Race* teaches its contestants and cable television/LOGO online audiences how to "read" the participants and the discourse of drag culture in relation to the established

The original L.A. Eyeworks campaign featuring RuPaul.

codes of reality television (where we move from drag houses to "Team Raja" or "Entouraja" and various plays on the word "fan": Fanilas, Fandoras, etc.). It also adds a level of corporate sponsorship and product-placement mostly absent from Livingston's documentary yet essential to shows like *America's Next Top Model* and *Project Runway*. (*Paris Is Burning* was distributed by Miramax, but, as the credits indicate, partially funded by the National Endowment for the Arts, and executive produced by Nigel Finch for BBC Television and Davis Lacy for WNYC Television). Beyond the "pink dollar" companies of L.A. Eyeworks, Interior Illusions, wig and gown makers, gay travel agencies, and cosmetics (MAC, Krylon, NYX), the omnipresent sponsor of *RuPaul's Drag Race* is Absolut Vodka (and the prize includes headlining the Absolut Vodka Gay Pride tour, a perfect symbol of the commodification of gay culture). The distorted connection to drag ball culture is apparent in *RPDR* S1:E6, "Absolut Drag Ball."

In this light, let us remember that the title of the documentary *Paris Is Burning* in fact refers to a drag ball thrown by Paris Dupree, MC and house mother, and the houses represent appropriations of trademarked couture house names (for example: Saint Laurent) for the purposes of gay kinship and competition that is actually community-building. Absolut is not a house; it is a brand. In the "Absolut Drag Ball" episode, the mini-challenge is to vogue "in the tradition of *Paris Is Burning*" (a challenge won by Nina Flowers, a Puerto Rican queen who has stressed drag "sisterhood" in her career). The main challenge is to come up with three looks: Swimsuit (parodying *Miss America*), Executive Realness (a yuppie-aspirational category from *Paris Is Burning*), and Evening Wear, where the look must be inspired by a fruit-infused flavor of Absolut Vodka.

Absolut Product Placement (with one of the members of the hunky "Pit Crew" on *RuPaul's Drag Race*).

Isis Mirage and Coco Ferocha post *Drag Race* episode reviews on YouTube.

"Absolut Drag Ball": Rebecca Glasscock

"Absolut Drag Ball": Nina Flowers

"Absolut Drag Ball": Bebe Zahara Benet

In his review of the series, Bradford Nordeen is critical of this relentless product placement, and the way the queens are invited to sell themselves as a product. Nordeen calls Absolut Vodka "the numbingly name-dropped sponsor" and notes:

> "The bemused unease that I felt in that repeated brand placement seemed to invade the attitude that many of these contestant took to their trade. … (There's a suspicious tendency here to role-play the very real world concerns of drag culture: Drag on a Dime presents constructing a costume on the cheap as if it's something rare; whereas a post-Drag Race trip last night to the drag show at Barracuda confirms quite the contrary, as resident diva Peppermint regaled the audience with her experiences fighting the Con Edison bill collection team.) The first season dropped this kind of hokey fun that certain drag performers maintain, suggesting that the critical elements that camp once offered are (like poor Porkchop) a thing of the past. Instead, lavish couture

Drag Race contestants Manila Luzon (Season 3) and Sahara Davenport (Season 2) are a prominent "kai kai" drag queen couple.

gowns and MAC cosmetics maintain the interior illusion ... The quite-commercial endeavors of these queens became a startlingly distorted mirror to the prime time efforts of the reality shows from which their drag race was carbon copied. And this narrative seemed not different enough." (*Fanzine*)

While I have been stressing parody, resignification, and subversion, Nordeen offers an important reminder about the capitalist political economy of reality television and, like hooks on *Paris Is Burning*, questions whether the show is as "progressive" as it seems (in a more recent article on the problem of race in the series, Nordeen explicitly links *RPDR* to *Paris Is Burning* and asks, "Is the overt performativity of racial stereotypes by these queens liberating or merely self-perpetuating?"). In terms of commodification, RuPaul's show is also clearly an infomercial for RuPaul's songs (available on iTunes!) and the RuPaul brand itself. Elizabeth Schewe has argued that RuPaul's autobiography *Lettin It All Hang Out* expresses RuPaul's ambivalence about himself as a product:

> "While RuPaul embraces both the confessional autobiographical mode and the pop-culture marketplace that make his "rags to riches story" possible, he simultaneously draws on his working-class African American background to question "the consumer logic of late capitalism" that legitimates (depoliticized) queerness through its consumption 'as an aestheticized lifestyle' (Eng 43). In other words, although RuPaul glories in the power of performance to break down barriers and create community, the classed and racialized images of prostitution and slavery that recur throughout *Lettin* highlight his fear of exclusion from the very community that his commodified performances help to create. The specter of reader-as-consumer haunts the autobiography, and RuPaul's conflicting views of the reader as community member or voracious consumer are never resolved. ... Indeed, it is precisely through these unresolved tensions that RuPaul indirectly questions the rags-to-riches narrative that he employs and the assimilationist politics that go hand-in-hand with such a narrative of success." (670–71)

Schewe's concept of ambivalence and her use of José Muñoz's concept of "disidentification" in performance helps clarify for me why I don't fully agree with Nordeen that *RPDR* is a "carbon copy" of any of the intertexts I have discussed. Instead, I would suggest that distortion and migration of communal and discursive practices and meanings are inherent in the process of impersonation, citation, and metaization that I have been tracing here, and perhaps say more about the medium than the message. While *RPDR* resembles *Paris Is Burning* and continually cites it intertextually, it also indicates that queer culture is now frequently passed on between generations in a fashion more akin to "memes."

A RuPaul meme in real life (remixing a Ron Paul bumper sticker).

In contemporary new media culture, savvy television fans catalog the dissemination of tropes through wiki websites like TV Tropes (tvtropes.org)[2] [open endnotes in new window] and we can follow the quick explosion, mutation, and exhaustion of internet memes and the moment they "go meta" on our Facebook feeds. To my knowledge, no one has called attention to the possibility that memes might be "queer" in that they replace a theory of culture passed down like genetic material through heteroreproductive institutions with a theory of culture that is "worth passing on" across generations. This "queer" passing on of culture happens in non-heteronormative ways that in fact bypass family. (This is both the fear of conservatives wishing to police the Internet, and the promise of projects like *It Gets Better* where Dan Savage encourages gay adults to bypass parents and educators to speak directly to at-risk queer youth via YouTube.) Homophobes have long used the smokescreen of equating homosexuals with pedophiles in order to prevent any kind of continuity between queer generations

Miss J.'s official *It Gets Better* video with fierce diva snaps!

"Drag Professor" Jujubee on the spin-off female makeover show *RuPaul's Drag U*.

(and make sure that each suicidal gay youth feels like she or he is the only one, a point powerfully made in Eve Sedgwick's *Tendencies* (3)). On the one hand, RuPaul's television show may exemplify pink-dollar profiteering and what Lauren Berlant calls the "cruel optimism" of meritocracy and "rags to riches" fantasies (hearkening back to the dreams of the young transsexuals Octavia and Venus in *Paris Is Burning*). But on the other, it also cultivates a media-savvy and meta-savvy queer audience who might recognize these fantasies as utterly conventional and at odds with the show's counternarrative about queer kinship and intergenerational coaching. (And this coaching is not just from mother to child: recall the "Golden Gals" episode of season two where the queens are given drag "mothers" who are older Stonewall-era gay men, distorting the meaning of "drag mother" from the drag ball circuit, but also countering gay amnesia and generational isolation in a way congruent with the drag balls themselves.)

The *RuPaul's Drag Race* recap and reunion specials retrace how the queens' terminology is coined, appropriated, and disseminated ("true T," "no T, no shade," "sickening," "fishy," "booger," "Heathers," etc.)—performing a kind of linguistic anthropology akin to Judy Grahn's *Another Mother Tongue* or William L. Leap's *Word's Out: Gay Men's English*. The metalevels added by the recap/reunion specials and *Untucked* teach the audiences the art of indirection just as *Paris Is Burning* teaches "Reading," and "Shade." Indeed, Roger D. Abrahams's explication of black women's use of indirection aptly describes the contestant Jujubee, winner of the "Reading" mini-challenge in season two of *RPDR*, and her role in the workroom and in the Interior Illusions Lounge:

> "A person is loud-talking when he says something of someone just loud enough for that person to hear, but indirectly, so he cannot properly respond (Mitchell-Kernan). Another technique of signifying through indirection is making reference to a person or group not present, in order to start trouble between someone present and the ones who are not." (Abrahams, qtd. in Gates 77).

However, when the judges say that something "reads" a certain way (typically, "doesn't read as feminine") they are using the term in a more typically televisual sense ("reads on camera" as X).

While websites like Urban Dictionary offer the lure of tracing the etymology of subcultural, ethnic, and queer terms, the search for origins may be irrelevant. I would like to offer two subversions of the notion of originality. In Roland Barthes's *The Pleasure of the Text*, a short book of literary theory published in 1973, he suggests that literary criticism primarily concerns itself with the what he calls the tutor text, and always deals with texts of pleasure such as Flaubert, Proust, and Stendhal, never texts of bliss:

> "thus criticism speaks the futile bliss of the tutor text, its *past or future* bliss: *you are about to read, I have read*" (21–22).

But he later notes another kind of tutoring: he reads Proust in a text cited by Stendhal, and reads a passage in Flaubert

> "*according to* Proust. I savor the sway of formulas, the reversal of origins, the ease which brings the anterior text out of the subsequent one. I recognize that Proust's work, for myself at least, is *the* reference work, the general *mathesis*, the *mandala* of the entire literary cosmogony" (35–36).

Barthes suggests that this is what defines the "inter-text." I have argued that this is true for the three major intertexts of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, but especially *Paris Is Burning*. We read one text according to another, sometimes even against proper chronology.

Another subversion of origins can be found in Butler's "Imitation and Gender

Insubordination." She offers "something like a confession" that when she was young she suffered from the allegation that being lesbian is always

> "a kind of miming, a vain effort to participate in the phantasmatic plenitude of naturalized heterosexuality which will always and only fail" (21).

Yet she remembers "quite distinctly when I first read in Esther Newton's *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* that drag is not an imitation or a copy of some prior and true gender; according to Newton, drag enacts the very structure of impersonation by which *any gender* is assumed." (21). Thus, "the naturalistic effects of heterosexualized genders are produced through imitative strategies" as well (21). Such a non-essentialist model suggests that gender is a kind of technology. While Butler stresses the mundane aspects of this technology, I believe that RuPaul recaptures some of the early thrill of *Gender Trouble* in the spectacular teaser for season four of *RuPaul's Drag Race* aired on *The Insider*.

RuPaul's sci-fi drag control panel for the preview of Season 4.

Drag control panel.

"For The Children."

A memorable term from the MC of *Paris Is Burning* (note the slight shift: OPULENCE to OPULENT); a frequently used term from *Drag Race*, "sickening."

A term used by contestants in *Drag Race* to describe bad drag: "Booger."

Sci-fi drag hyperbole.

"The House Down" functions as a grafted figure of speech (perhaps comparable to "over" ["ovah"] in *Paris Is Burning*).

Another drag term with multiple spellings: Work, Werk, Werq.

It starts with RuPaul in male "executive realness" drag walking down a corporate office/laboratory hallway with a Muzak version of "Jealous of My Boogie" playing (perhaps acknowledging the effect of banalization through corporate sponsorship criticized by Nordeen). But as RuPaul enters the passcode to enter a "lab" he is transformed into a Gareth Pugh-inspired Sci-fi "Glamazon" at a control panel labeled with intertextual references to previous seasons and to *Paris Is Burning*:

- "Fierce,"
- "Severe,"
- "For the Children,"
- "Drag Coefficient,"
- "Opulent,"
- "Sickening,"
- "Booger [Off],"
- "Devastating,"
- "The House Down,"
- "Werk."

RuPaul's "Drag Droids" are constructed/deconstructed while RuPaul screams "They're alive" (this is the kind of B-movie allusion she frequently makes to *Mommie Dearest*, *Snakes on a Plane*, etc.). They are instructed to "go forth and be sickening," suggesting that RuPaul is both creator, mother, boss, producer, and is herself a technological product (since she resembles them and is also zapped with electricity from the "fierceness overload"). What we witness here is the technology of gender, the technology of commodification, and the technology of fandom as we take pleasure in the intertextual references of this "new media" device and the further metaization of *RuPaul's Drag Race*.

[Go to page 3](#)

New media meme and commercial.

Coda: the script of season 4

Each contestant was pre-taped frowning while holding the check she didn't win (Willam was disqualified).

Willam's timely video parody "Chow Down (at Chick-fil-A)."

A meme: Willam's witty term from the reunion special.

The recently concluded Season Four of *RuPaul's Drag Race* turned out to be some of the most tightly "scripted" reality television, with a stronger emphasis placed on "the rules" of the show in a way that further heightens the show's metareferentiality and its intertextual relation to *Project Runway* and competitions like *American Idol*.

Specifically, in the episode "Frenemies" (S4:E8) the tendency of reality television scripts/editing to create intense rivalries between contestants and thus to encourage fans to "take sides" became an explicit device, in this case making established "enemies" Sharon Needles and Phi Phi O'Hara team up to work together on a musical number (the "team challenge" often reveals rivalries and personality clashes, especially in *Project Runway*). But there was a further demonstration of television "drama," after they had to lip-sync for their lives, and the audience eagerly anticipated RuPaul's decision to send home either fan-favorite or hated rival. RuPaul announced that in fact Willam, who had won the team challenge with Latrice Royale, had broken "the rules" of the show and therefore was disqualified and must go home (but would not specify what rule had been broken, and Willam's onstage nervous vomiting before the announcement only made the guessing game more intense). This season, in keeping with the conventions established in *Project Runway* (and *ANTM*), the show's producers have foregrounded "the rules" ("contract"): the contestants are isolated from the outside world, and contact with loved ones (through video phone) is a coveted prize to be won. Thus, the rumor spread that Willam broke the rules by making contact with the outside/online world during filming. But RuPaul, the producers, and Willam carefully kept this information a secret in order to prolong the fans' curiosity, promising "all will be revealed" in the show's reunion special (which it was, confirming the rumor as true). In an interview with *Entertainment Weekly*, the seasoned television actor Willam was asked "Why do you have to be cryptic about what happened on last night's episode?" and responded,

> "Oh, no, no — not at all. We don't have to be cryptic. It's my choice. I want people to keep tuning in. Maybe watch me at the reunion."

When asked if this was a stunt to garner publicity (perhaps timed with the release of Willam's iTunes single and timely video parody "Chow Down (at Chick-fil-A)"), Willam responded:

> "I'm going to leave all these answers up to wiser men than I at the network. I do like the fact that they didn't make it seem like I got caught doing something, like my hand was in the cookie jar. Everything that I did on that show was pretty much in character, except for when I cried."

In an *LAWeekly* Blog article about the West Hollywood season premier

Fans were instructed "Just tweet who you want to see win #TeamChad, #TeamPhiPhi or #TeamSharon and use those hashtags too along with #DragRace." [Shirts from http://shop.logotv.com/]

"All Stars" is now an inevitable phase in talent competition reality shows.

screening of Season Four, Willam noted that while she was "in character" she struggled a bit with the "scripted" aspect of reality television:

> "*Drag Race* was just a gig for me, albeit a huge one. Being on TV definitely gave me an edge but the whole reality thing was difficult," he told us. "A judge told me I was 'going off script' once and I'm, like, 'Wha-huh? Wait. Ain't this reality?' I only gave the cameras what I wanted to give them so you'll get a great, concentrated version of Willam." (Lecaro)

The reporter suggests that "Though most reality shows are for the most part anything but, we've always found *Drag Race* more authentic than most." As a counterpoint, a blogger *Fierce Black Queen* felt the overt manipulation of the "Frenemies" episode was the tipping-point for him as a fan:

> "Here is the self-induced schizophrenia that I am looking to avoid in the future: I want to watch this show either as a study in Reality TV editing, or a Reality TV Show–not both. When RuPaul announced that their team was on the bottom, I thought of it as a study: which one would the producers pick? Sharon is an important favorite, Phi Phi is an important antagonist... which would they sacrifice? Then, when they started performing, I watched it as a Reality TV Fan. The Queen starting rooting for Sharon, and praying that Ru would not reward one more damn Drag Queen for Dancing For Your Life, instead of lip syncing for it. And then Ru comes out with a twist worthy of *Citizen Kane*. So it's Sashay Away to Willam. The Queen will go into detail about his thoughts on the 'break the rules' convention, and why I think it was the straw that broke the gay camel's back. Suffice it to say, that as a dramatic device it had more holes than Gruyère Cheese. I will miss Willam. He was one of the most interesting characters on Reality TV that the Queen has seen in a long time. He is the evolved product of the genre: a self-aware performer, who had an intricate game-plan that he executed brilliantly. He was a strange combination of someone you love to hate...and love to love. If you ask the Queen, it was a PERFECT way for him to go out: dramatic, with much intrigue." (FBQ)

A good example of this self-awareness and humor from Willam can be seen in the *Entertainment Weekly* interview upon his exit:

> "Outside of this incident, did you think you had a good chance of winning?"

> "I think I won. Didn't I? Phi Phi O'Hara says that 'everyone is a winner just by being on the show.' So I think I'm a winner, right? Yeah. No, I thought the front runner this year was RuPaul because she's won every other year. She's the only one that gets residuals, so good on her." (Lacaro)

In fact, this became the explicit theme of the final RuPaul video for "Glamazon" which, in atypical fashion, was deliberately leaked before the final episode, during which we saw the filming of the "prequel" narrative to the video, in which RuPaul refuses to give up her crown, and further deconstructs her "Supermodel of the World" persona (and its inverse image: her "RudePaul" reputation). In another twist on her own show's

established formula, RuPaul asks all of the three contestants (Chad, Sharon, and PhiPhi) to lip-sync for their lives, but, just as the audience expected RuPaul's final decision, she added a final coup that appears to undermine her previous insistence that the final decision was hers alone to make (despite the advice of Michelle Visage and Santino Rice). She opened the final decision to a fan vote (thus aligning the show with audience-vote driven contests like *American Idol*), something usually reserved for the reunion special "Miss Congeniality" vote, or the anticipated *RuPaul's All Stars Drag Race*. Thus, *RuPaul's Drag Race* has, in its fourth season, begun to turn its *own* rules "upside down." The question remains whether savvy fans[3] [open endnotes in new window] and contestants can keep up with this level of overtly scripted manipulation, "schizophrenia," and metareferentiality.

Go to Notes page

Notes

1. J. L. Austin's concept of "performative" language—that is, a speech act that doesn't merely describe a given situation but actually brings into being that which it names—has been immensely productive for gender studies and queer theory (extending beyond speech to cultural discourse including gender assignment and forms of "coming out of the closet"). However, some uses of the term "performative" in performance studies lose sight of the role that social convention and the unconscious play in the performative effects of discourse beyond the intentions of an individual actor knowingly performing a theatrical role, which I am here calling "performancy" as it connotes willed performance. On this, see J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 2nd Edition (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1975) and Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York: Routledge, 1993). [return to page 1]

2. As the TV Tropes website explains:

> "This wiki is a catalog of the tricks of the trade for writing fiction. Tropes are devices and conventions that a writer can reasonably rely on as being present in the audience members' minds and expectations. On the whole, tropes are not clichés. The word clichéd means 'stereotyped and trite.' In other words, dull and uninteresting. We are not looking for dull and uninteresting entries. We are here to recognize tropes and play with them, not to make fun of them. The wiki is called "TV Tropes" because TV is where we started. Over the course of a few years, our scope has crept out to include other media. Tropes transcend television. They reflect life. Since a lot of art, especially the popular arts, does its best to reflect life, tropes are likely to show up everywhere. We are not a stuffy encyclopedic wiki. We're a *buttload* more informal. We encourage breezy language and original thought. There Is No Such Thing as Notability, and no citations are needed. If your entry cannot gather any evidence by the Wiki Magic, it will just wither and die. Until then, though, it will be available through the Main Tropes Index. We are also not a wiki for bashing things. Once again, we're about *celebrating* fiction, not showing off how snide and sarcastic we can be."

See: http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/HomePage

[return to page 2]

3. I would like to thank Bradford Nordeen, Maureen Turim, Linda Howell,

Melissa McCarron, Diana Aldrete, Christopher Perrello, Lauren Jones, Alex Palmer, Hayden Drewery, Erin Tuzuner, Carl Cochrane, Jessie Nute, Matthew Birmingham and the queens of Dragstravaganza (Jacksonville, FL), among many other friends and fans of the show, for sharing their thoughts and insights about *RuPaul's Drag Race*. This essay developed out of my presentation on a panel at the Northeast Modern Language Association conference, 'You've got She-Mail!': Drag and Discursive Limits in *RuPaul's Drag Race*, organized by Diana Aldrete and Melissa McCarron, March 17, 2012. [return to page 3]

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Framing the world economics in a tuna can: Luc Moullet tracks the *Origins of a Meal/ Genèse d'un repas* (1978)

by Audrey Evrard

Luc Moullet and Antonietta Pizzorno eat tuna from Senegal, bananas from Ecuador and an omelette made with eggs probably laid by battery hens in Brittany.

Senegalese workers have some fun while filling up cans with tuna meat.

Origins of a Meal (Luc Moullet, 1978) tracks three basic food items, bananas, eggs and tuna, in order to know where they really come from and what their commerce implies for all involved. This leads Luc Moullet to a great number of locations in France, Senegal and Ecuador. His inquiry takes him to factories, fishing boats, loading and unloading docks, grocery stores, open-air markets, rural plantations, poor villages, supermarkets, cities and official buildings in Dakar, Paris and Machala. There, he meets and records the points of view of a wide variety of people, including store managers, grocers, trade union representations, small and large banana plantation owners, dockers, cannery workers, business executives, fishermen. For the most part, these men, women, and children tell us about the long-lasting structural social, ethnic, and economic divisions that foster inequalities and exploitation at all levels of the global food trade—local, national and international.

Luc Moullet's voice-over acts as an interweaving thread throughout the film more than as a warrant of authority. If viewers can somewhat rely on these comments to tease out the filmmaker's political inclinations, this voice plays on many occasions with irony and counterpoint. In *Origins of a Meal*, French filmmaker and critic Luc Moullet extends the borders of his typically local or Francocentric cinema and adopts a top-down approach to the international food trade. The documentary, which was released in France in 1978, delivers a serious, complex and intellectually compelling analysis of global exploitation that raises question not only on the responsibility of industrial interests but also and most significantly on that of French consumers.

In a recent article, Sally Shafto describes *Origins of a Meal* as a prototype for recent documentaries that have deconstructed the cogs of globalization and denounced the damages wrought by industrialization on our food supply.[1] [open endnotes in new window] Admittedly, a direct line can easily be traced between Luc Moullet's *Origins of a Meal* (1978), Amos Gitaï's *Ananas Connection*

Luc Moullet listens to an Ecuadorean worker who describes his working conditions.

Two French dockers share their insight on the mechanization of the port of Dieppe.

A Senegalese fisherman describes the racial hierarchies on board between local employees and French expatriates.

(1984), and more recent films like *Black Gold* (Nick and Mark Francis, 2006) and *Bananas* (Fredrik Gertten, 2009). Like Moullet, Gitaï and Gertten address the hazardous social and humanitarian effects of the food industry's practices in the "banana republics" of the world—in these two instances, the Philippines. They do so with a much more accusatory tone towards California-based Dole Food Company.

However, *Origins of a Meal* does more than set a new trend for documentary filmmakers. Shafto suggests that this documentary film did in fact go much further in its critique than many contemporary productions, which tend to forgo national history and policies and blame globalization for skyrocketing rates of unemployment, deregulation of labor and exploitation of migrant workers. However, she stops short of explaining exactly how the film proceeds with this agenda. This article claims therefore that the intellectual significance and continued relevance of *Origins of a Meal* to today's debates lies in Luc Moullet's persistent reliance on colonialism as an ideological grid relevant to the understanding of globalization—a concept still ill-defined in the late 1970s. His approach ensures historical bivalency for the documentary's inquiry. On the one hand, *Origins of a Meal* anticipates future political and ethical engagements with global injustice, but on the other it also prolongs and reflects upon past documentary portrayals of colonialism. Comparisons can thus be drawn with an early colonial film like *Song of Ceylon*, for instance: in this 1933 documentary commissioned by the Ceylon Tea Propaganda Board, Basil Wright delivers an ambivalent portrayal of the colonial food trade.

Like *Song of Ceylon*, *Origins of a Meal* deals as much with the exploitative nature of the colonial/global food trade as it does with the position of Western documentary filmmakers within the systems of colonial and imperialist exploitation. These economic and political structures profoundly damaged the economic sustainability of British and French colonies, first, and later independent countries in the Third World and the Global South. *Song of Ceylon*'s "ideological dissonance," as William Guynn puts it, remains latent, overpowered by the poetic treatment of Sri Lankan "native" customs (84). Luc Moullet, on the contrary, fully endorses dissonance as a principle of documentary inquiry. *Origins of a Meal* operates on multiple layers, both in its form and in its content. Luc Moullet's voice-over, which runs through the film, clearly defines the filmmaker's leftist political inclinations as he provides his viewers with contextual information and critical statements. However, editing accentuates the film's inclusionary and polyvocal documentary narrative. As editing continuously interweaves three food trades—bananas, eggs and tuna—the film builds historical continuity throughout the film, tying together issues of colonialism, imperialism and globalization.

Origins of a Meal relies as much on the testimonies of employees and

An importer based in Rungis, Paris's largest wholesale market, compares the quality of bananas from Ecuador and the French Caribbean.

A major Ecuadorean exporter comments on U.S. imperialistic presence in South America and how it affects the country's food trade.

Reminders of French colonization continue to shape Dakar's cityscape.

trade unionists as those of business representatives. Throughout the film, Senegalese, Ecuadorean and French representatives at all levels of the food trade share their experiences and analyses of the business. They describe the power struggles that inevitably divide people along racial, national and socio-economic lines. Thus, viewers learn from the workers themselves that, while French female workers are forbidden to talk and forced to stand for maximum productivity during their shifts, in Senegal women working in canneries are allowed to sit and laugh with one another. They are also denied basic safety measures like gloves and often spend four hours a day on a bus to get to work. Similarly, although French dockers complain about backpain, machines now handle most of their work. In contrast, in Ecuador, boys as young as eleven and men of all ages carry heavy cases of bananas up and down narrow planks over eight hours a day to the sound of Latin American music. Moreover, business representatives provide some rare insight, often ignored by leftist cinema. One French expatriate, a Vice President of canning facilities in Senegal, explains somewhat candidly that little has changed in France's economic relations with Senegal now that the country is independent. In other words, although they now officially control only 35 % of Senegal's business interests according to him, French companies still dominate. In Ecuador, a large exporter admits that giving in to U.S. corporate interests makes their work much easier even though it undermines his country's economic autonomy and growth.

Moullet's willingness to hear the business side and, most importantly, to refrain from belittling their documentary value is quite rare in left-wing filmmaking. As such, *Origins of a Meal* exceeds what Alison Smith describes as post-May 68 French cinema's

> "genuine discovery, or rediscovery, of a collective identity, where individuals could add their voice to the general shout that all is not well and, to a limited extent, inflect the methods and the priorities, if not of the social establishment at least of the 'recognized spokesmen of the people' – the Unions or the Parti Communiste Français (PCF) – which many felt to be stagnating or not to be sufficiently sensitive to changes in perception." (1)

Luc Moullet shared this growing dissatisfaction with the traditional Left, especially the Communist Party, which he described in an interview dating from 1980 as "selfish and opportunistic." He even qualified their myopic focus on French employers as "dangerous."[2] *Origins of a Meal* exposes instead how French wholesalers and retailers took advantage of the colonial past to compete internationally and how consumers' short-sighted trust in brands and marketing campaigns, and often-misled pride in regional labels of quality, makes them complicit of a global system of exploitation. Luc Moullet's compelling documentary *Origins of a Meal* well exceeds the militant agenda that motivated France's political documentary cinema throughout the 1960s and early 70s. His much broader outlook on exploitation as a political, economic, social, environmental and humanitarian scheme ends up questioning the very principles governing the French Left's self-serving focus on European working classes, their social mobility and materialistic aspirations.

Similarly, supermarkets are filled with products directly imported from France and other countries.

Ecuador, like other South American countries , have become "banana republics" controlled economically by U.S. corporations and politically by military dictatorships.

As a critic and a filmmaker, Luc Moullet has rarely abided by conventions whether political or artistic. A regular contributor to *Les Cahiers du Cinéma* since 1956, he has reviewed the films of Eric Rohmer, King Vidor, Sam Fuller, Raoul Ruiz, Anthony Mann, Michelangelo Antonioni, and many others. He is also the author of several books, including a short analysis of Fritz Lang's cinema and a provocative essay entitled *La Politique des acteurs*. Published in 1993, this essay directly refers to François Truffaut's call in 1953 for a "*politique des auteurs*" in the New Wave manifesto, "A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema." Contrary to Truffaut's assertion of the *auteur*-filmmaker's creative leadership in the studio system, Moullet returns to the same period of Classical Hollywood cinema only to claim a similar authorship for the four most iconic male actors, Gary Cooper, Cary Grant, John Wayne and James Stewart. Luc Moullet continues to film and write at a steady pace, which compelled the Centre Pompidou in Paris to celebrate his career as a filmmaker in 2009. Among Moullet's latest publications, it is worth mentioning a monograph study of King Vidor's *The Fountainhead* (*La rebelle de King Vidor: Les arêtes vives* (2009)) and two edited volumes: *Piges choisies* (2009), a collection gathering some of his film critical essays, and *Notre alpin quotidien* (2009), a series of interviews with French film critics Jean Narboni and Emmanuel Burdeau.

Although Luc Moullet has made over thirty feature films since the early 1960s, his quirky, free-spirited cinematic work remains fairly unknown to mainstream audiences in France and abroad. Moullet's relative anonymity in post-war French cinema turned out to be an extremely productive and liberating environment which allowed him to experiment with his unique conception of cinema. Playing across genres, Moullet's films often provide a sociological portrait of contemporary France, including Parisian student life (*Brigitte et Brigitte*, 1966), heterosexual relationships (*Anatomie d'un rapport*, 1974), unemployment (*La comédie du travail*, 1987) and, more recently, death (*Le prestige de la mort*, 2006). Blending fiction and documentary aesthetics, no format escapes Moullet's vision. Yet, low-budget, comedic narratives seem to have been the preferred mode of expression for a filmmaker whose friend experimental filmmaker Jean-Marie Straub describes as "the true heir of Luis Buñuel and Jacques Tati."[3] Several critics, including Claudine Le Pallec Marand and Saad Chakali, have described his approach to filmmaking as *bricolage*, nourished by a broad cinephilic knowledge and a fascination for Hollywood B-movies. Staging Moullet the actor in burlesque peregrinations, Moullet the filmmaker typically pursues scathing yet unstilted social commentaries on modern society. Moullet strongly defends unbounded expression, unburdened by social propriety, and he often achieves this at the expense of stylistic and formal sophistication, which he associates with bourgeois decorum.

Origins of a Meal only slightly hints at Moullet's taste for the unusual and quasi-absurd situations. The opening table scene introduces Luc Moullet and Antonietta Pizzorno, his partner in life and on the screen, side by side, sitting across what could be a dining table facing the camera and the spectators. In front of them, one can see the tuna can, an omelette, and the bananas that compose this unusual meal and serve as the narrative motif of the film. The scene's artificiality sets it apart from the rest of the film, which digs deep into the economic,

Ecuador is the world's top exporter of bananas.

In France, eggs are increasingly laid by battery hens: a cruel system of mass production.

social and human reality of the food trade. Towards the end, Moullet reappears in character, endorsing one of his favorite roles, that of an out-of-place yet clairvoyant globetrotter.

Go to page 2

To top   Print version   JC 54   *Jump Cut* home

Other misleading labels include tuna cans that use Brittany's imagery to lure customers.

Tuna, an omelet, bananas: products of France? Strategic misframings

Origins of a Meal opens, as I have just mentioned, with what might best be described as a prop scene. The "lunch," which looks more like a tasting session than a typical French meal, consists of an omelette, canned tuna and, for dessert, bananas. Two slices of bread and cups of water complete the set. The scene's artificiality is reinforced first by Luc Moullet and Antonietta Pizzorno's silence as they help themselves and eat the food items carefully propped on display for the camera and soon after by Moullet's voice-over which explains that

> "after the tuna, [they] will have an omelet and some bananas."

The voice-over goes on, addressing the viewers directly, saying:

> "[you] recognize these things, but [you] don't know what they are. Tuna, an omelet, bananas."

Learning about the true origin of these three fairly ordinary food items is thus implicitly introduced as the goal of the film and Moullet's tri-continental journey between France, West Africa and South America. In an interview published in the French journal *Cinéma 80* (1980), Luc Moullet explains that the idea to do a feature-length documentary film on the food trade came while working on his first feature film, *Un Steak Trop Cuit* (*Overdone Steak*, 1960).[4][open endnotes in new window] Luc Moullet's decision to focus on these three specific items, tuna, eggs and bananas, might seem odd and arbitrary at first. His efforts to "diversify as much as possible the food items and choose diverse origins" in order to reflect the reality of the food industry, as he explains, lead him to introduce "three products […] from France, the 'French Third World', and foreign 'Third World' countries." Once juxtaposed, the trades of bananas, eggs and tuna reveal in fact obvious continuity and stark parallels between past colonial structures of land and human exploitation and the global extension of the free market economy.

When Luc Moullet worked on *Origins of a Meal*, Senegal, a former French colony, had been independent for less than twenty years: President Leopold Sédar Senghor proclaimed his country an independent Republic in 1960. Yet footage recorded on the streets of Dakar, in supermarkets and at various workplaces as well as interviews with Senegalese and French expatriates make obvious the fact that ruthless colonial practices forcefully imposed in the past enabled France to maintain a strong and visible economic presence in the country and continued to determine the political and economic relations France has developed with – or should we say in – post-colonial Africa. In Moullet's words,

> "France's occupation by Germany was nothing compared to Senegal's colonization by France." (1' 02" 40)

In reality, the tuna is fished and canned in Dakar, Senegal.

Banania, the number one chocolate powder for children, continues to use a racist representation of colonial Africa successfully. Otherwise, brands mask the true origin of their products.

French grocers and consumers claim the superior quality of bananas from Guadeloupe and Martinique, two French overseas departments.

Similarly, although independent for almost a century and a half, Ecuador's national economy was still stifled with foreign interests, particularly U.S. multinational corporate interests that had taken over the fruit trade and turned Ecuador and several other Latin American countries into "banana/dessert republics."

Throughout the documentary, Moullet's editing indiscriminately moves between footage filmed in Senegal, Ecuador, and France, highlighting as a result stark parallels between French and U.S. corporations' economic practices in these two countries. From the colonies of West Africa to the "banana republics" of South America, Moullet finds that

> "the art of colonialism has been perfected." (1'05''24)

If more time is dedicated to the banana and tuna trades in *Origins of a Meal*, depictions of the egg trade suggest that structurally France's agribusiness is not that different from international food trades. The director of a private cooperative reluctantly admits in front of the camera that labels no longer guarantee traceability. If Brittany stands for superior quality on tuna cans, the region becomes the Senegal of the egg trade. Labels and boxes might harbor symbols of Picardie, a region in the north of France well known for its dairy and egg products, but most eggs come from battery hens in Brittany.

In the early minutes of the documentary, a store manager working for a large French supermarket distributor, U prix, explains to Luc Moullet that a new brand, "Pêcheurs de France," (Fishermen of France) had been selling much better than its competitors sold on the next shelves. He adds that the label, which might explain the quicker turnaround, is quite misleading since cans sold as "Pêcheurs de France" products are in fact imported from Senegal. Interestingly, customers have not shown much interest in another brand, visibly imported from the Ivory Coast this time, even though its cost is roughly the same. Both Moullet and the manager thus discuss what might justify customers' preference for the former. They conclude it is because of the greater appeal of Brittany, a coastal region of France known for its fresh seafood, over items grown, processed and traded in far-off lands. Conversations with Parisian grocers concerning the quality of bananas imported from the French Caribbean islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe over that of bananas produced in Ecuador confirm the same chauvinistic tendency among retailers and consumers. Brands thus capitalize on consumers' racism, whether racist imagery sells—as on Banania, a famous chocolate powder that French children have traditionally had for breakfast— or whether they frenchify labels and hide the true origin of products by fear of "putting off" French consumers. Quite ironically, though, racial tensions that have characterized French metropolitan and Caribbean societies become erased when France re-incorporates Martinique and Guadeloupe in the name of trade protectionism. A second layer of irony lies in Moullet's recording of such positions from the mouths of grocers, whose names and accents betray

Even if brand stickers want us to believe otherwise, these bananas probably come from the same plantation.

immigrant origins.

These sequences reveal a perfect example of what Nancy Fraser describes as "misframing" in her book *Scales of Justice: Reimagining Political Space in a Globalizing World* (2009). Fraser defines "misframing" essentially as a conscious misrepresentation of the community, often to avoid facing questions of social and political injustice. *Origins of a Meal* draws attention to the misframing of the now irrevocably global economic community:

> "the community's boundaries are drawn in such a way as to wrongly exclude some people from the chance to participate at all in the authorized contests over justice." (19)

The documentary points to the exclusion of labor in Ecuador, Senegal, but increasingly in any site of production that would expose the exploitative, cruel and hazardous nature of the food trade and agribusiness. By focusing on the origin of food products and not on labor conditions in sites of production, *Origins of a Meal* creates a misframed representation of globalization in order to expose French consumers, workers and trade unions' hypocritical misframing of the international food trade.

French tuna workers complain about increasingly demanding rates of productivity, which their union representative confirms before warning against the rapid relocation of canning sites in Africa.

In Luc Moullet's film essay, *Origins of a Meal*, misframing has a double value. It is first presented as a means by which global capitalist interests can be pushed through insofar as global labor is being fragmented along national boundaries. A second level of interpretation emerges when Moullet intentionally "misframes" globalization as a replay of France's past colonial hegemony in order to reframe global labor exploitation as a development inextricably linked to that of Western consumerism. Sequences already mentioned about misleading labels on tuna cans and egg cartons and unfounded assertions that "French" Caribbean bananas are superior in quality to those imported from South America give evidence of what one might call "marketing misframings." These marketing strategies symbolically extend the national space for profit returns. Like national governments, business interests strategically play national political and social safeguards against supranational economic structures and networks. However, as was the case during the colonial era, the real success of this strategic misframing becomes obvious once workers, trade unionists and consumers start believing and promoting the misrepresentations.

The globalization dilemma: affluence or work?

In *Origins of a Meal*, Moullet mediates several discourses, but the two most obvious and consistent lines that both conflict and intersect at the very core of a phenomenon, soon-to-be-widely-named globalization, are traditional trade unionist struggles for workers' rights and neo-colonialism. Although exceptions can be spotted, generally speaking, the first half of the film tends to focus on working conditions, wages, productivity standards, while the second half affirms the socioeconomic differences between the everyday life of a worker in Senegal or Ecuador and that of a French worker.

A fade out gives Moullet a brief moment to summarize for the spectator French industries' blackmailing strategies: "If there's a strike, they
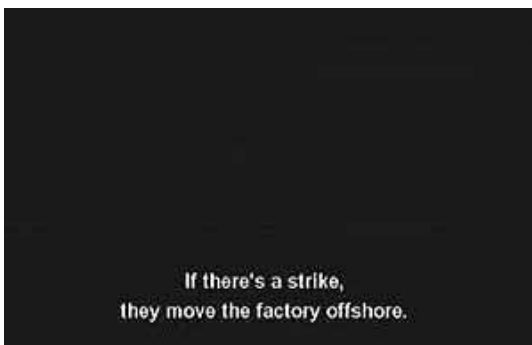
During a sequence filmed at a fishery in France, a French trade unionist discusses the increasing threat that overseas labor represents for employment in France:

In Africa, though, local employees suffer long-lasting racial inequalities and have absolutely no bargaining power.

Yet "Blacks" and "Whites" do the same job, as a young Senegalese fisherman explains.

On board, tensions are common between African and French crew members even though

"Because *Pêche et Froid* is a multinational group – *Pêche et Froid* includes *Saupiquet* and *Air Liquide*. They only care about profits, so they produce their tuna out there. We all know about working conditions and wages in Africa. That tuna is brought into France duty free, and is in competition with tuna produced here. The company sees the immediate benefits: it's profitable. Tomorrow, here we are, and the worry is that in the months and years to come, all the tuna which comes into France in Boulogne will be processed in Africa. That's when you worry about jobs." (30" 45)

This intervention occurs during a longer sequence that gives a perfect example of how Moullet uses editing to convey discursive shifts. We first listen to three French workers, two women working on the production line of eggs and a male union representative, who stands by their side in the camera frame. The workers first explain what their daily conditions at work are and what they would prefer conditions to be. This first part ends with the trade unionist describing the changing dynamic of employment in France and in the world, now that increased competition with labor abroad not only threatens jobs in France but also undermines the possibility for workers to ask for better conditions. A fade-out and prolonged black frame allows Moullet to basically rephrase for us the major stakes of the methods that multinational companies use to divide and conquer before introducing ways in which French employees do take advantage of the new international competition:

"Business owners promote the worldwide competition of all waged labor: a strike and they relocate the factory abroad. They also set different salaries for the same job in the same country."

After this imageless transition, a third sequence is inserted, introducing this time two fishermen working on the same boat in Dakar, one from Senegal and the other one from Brittany. As in the first sequence, Moullet asks them to talk about their working conditions but the Breton fisherman will be the only one to answer.

In this three-part sequence, Luc Moullet starts with representations that militant cinema would typically address—the precarious situation of women in the industrial sector, male-dominated trade unionism emphasizing wages, requesting more humane conditions and denouncing common practices that companies use to undermine the politics of trade unions by threatening employment. As he juxtaposes the three different working conditions described above, the apparent national "misframing" of economic exploitation, however, gradually reveals Moullet's intention to reframe the scope of exploitation to cover ethnic discrimination and in this case colonial hegemony since the two men, on the boat, work in Dakar, Senegal. Importantly, the visual composition of each image does not simply replicate what Moullet states. It also provides additional interpretations that sharpen and add to the basic argument made by the voice-over and the sequence.

Thus, in the first image, the two women let the union representative speak for them, while random numbers written all over the blackboard rationalize the exploitation of labor in France and the legitimacy of union politics. The second image also conveys an implicit power dynamic between the two men. Only the fisherman from Brittany on the right answers Moullet's questions while the Senegalese worker on the left sits

the work load tends to put the Senegalese at a disadvantage.

The work of dockers also varies whether you live in Ecuador or ...

... in France, which has invested in mechanized conveyor belts.

From a French point of view, Senegalese workers have no work ethic.

back quietly. Their postures signal a clear recognition of who has authority on the boat. To a large extent, this short sequence captures one of the major shifts that the film establishes all along, both in relation to the militant cinema of the previous decade and to the geopolitical implications of globalization. In 1968, cinema focused on the plight of French and immigrant workers in French factories. Since the 1970s, filmmakers have often taken their camera abroad in an effort to compare labor conditions but also illustrate how capitalism operates across national boundaries and is thus able to use national disparities in terms of workers' rights to its advantage.

In the sequence that follows, Moullet details the inequalities experienced by "black" and "white" fishermen, based in Dakar—home for the Senegalese employees and the country where French expatriates can enjoy the luxury lifestyle that their higher wages allow. Here, voice-over and images work against the "French" narrative. *Origins of a Meal* has no consistent point of view sustained throughout. Like the production lines filmed in the early minutes of the film, the camera adopts multidirectional points of view that allow Moullet to throw the spectator into a variety of positions. This particular sequence makes clear the racialization of the global workplace and the superimposition of a colonial grid onto emerging global markets and partnerships. The first shot adopts Breton fishermen's high-angled points of view to show the Senegalese employees working on the lower deck—another spatial metaphor of social hierarchy.

Similar sequences occur earlier in the film, using this time parallel editing to contrast the low impact, and somewhat undemanding, tasks performed by French dockers with the fast-paced, physically taxing comings and goings of Ecuadorean carriers of banana cases up and down the loading docks. If a clear contrast is established visually, irony plays a major role, as in the sequence on the boat in Dakar, to destabilize the framing preferred by the French employees. All along we hear voice-over comments from French workers complaining about the physical injuries that the work causes. While the truth of such claims is not questioned, Moullet's juxtaposition and superimposition of audio and visual tracks relativizes the conditions experienced by French employees and suggests what the filmmaker will say later, e.g. that everybody at all levels takes advantage of this system, either to improve their conditions, to have a job that will allow them to feed their families or to keep costs low. They are all part of a well-oiled chain that needs to perpetuate social and economic inequalities, not to promote development and prosperity for all but to produce maximum profits for itself.

I shall now return to the boat sequence to see how in this case the colonial past is clearly present as a subtext. The discrepancy that is made evident between the two tracks creates irony insofar as the slackers turn out to be the French workers, protected by better work regulations and social status. Although inequalities get wider between both groups, Moullet explains that French workers complain that "Black" employees "work little and badly." Yet, the camera shows the latter at work carrying heavy pieces while the French stand relaxing on the upper deck. At this point, the voice-over repeats words which at that particular moment lose credibility:

> "'we have to do everything,' the French say."

Somehow, the filmmaker finds the perfect solution to appease and at the same time to supplement the racial tensions sensed throughout the sequence by adding an additional meaning. By using the negative image of

From a Senegalese point of view, the French have it easy while they do everything. Who is right then?

Film can solve the dispute for a brief instant as Black workers turn white, restoring a sense of dignity and hope in French workers threatened by job relocations outside of France.

his celluloid material, Moullet reverses skin colors, symbolically putting the "white" men back to work. Indeed, the two workers whose silhouettes are hardly recognizable appear to be light-skinned but they are in fact from Senegal.

We hear Moullet say,

> "White employees seem to wish an inversion of the amount of work that only film can offer."

His words echo other allusions to the relocation of work outside of France to countries where labor is cheap, a common business practice that causes unemployment to rise in France. Here, Moullet's visual effect recalls Frantz Fanon's famous analysis in *Black Skin, White Mask* (1952) of the postcolonial complex that Black subjects living in a white world experience. The colonial experience, however, is here suddenly reframed as globalization. At a time when companies seek maximum profits through lower labor costs, jobs become scarcer in France and reappear in the decolonized world. The social benefits acquired by French workers over the years now are in some ways a handicap as the producers of yesterday are now reduced to consumers. By playing with the film medium's surface, Moullet suggests that globalization may in fact superimpose a second complex onto what Fanon described in the early 1950s. This time Western workers also experience some kind of psychological complex as globalization forces them to lower their expectations in order to protect their social status and jobs. In other words, they envy the employability of their Black fellow workers, all the while refusing the social depreciation that is now required by companies. Off-records, a white fisherman shares with Moullet a common slogan among his "white" co-workers:

> "When blacks are everywhere, good men despair." (32" 58)

By presenting the globalization of French economy as the economic extension of colonialism, Luc Moullet is in fact both in line with the Third worldist discourse of the 1970s and later *altermondialist* rejections of the debt imposed on the countries of the Global South by the IMF, the WTO and the World Bank.[5] Indeed, what ATTAC and other activists have denounced is the systematic financial chokehold on poorer countries, as a result of policies determined by these international organizations. However, if *Origins of a Meal* foreshadows later emphases on immaterial labor, brands and consumerism, in the film big multinational companies are alluded to but never targeted directly. Only a few years later, though, the new evil hand of global capitalism, the corporation, will appear in documentaries and embody the dangers of globalization as in Amos Gitaï's personal take on agribusiness in *Ananas Connection* (1984), for instance, or more explicitly in *The Corporation* (Mark Ashbar and Jennifer Abbott, 2003).

Same assembly line, only longer

Luc Moullet admires the "picturesque quality" of the chain, a perfect symbol of global capitalism's multi-directional and multi-level backbone.

Instead of demonizing the brand, which Moullet could have easily done considering much of his footage from Ecuador made implicit references to United/Standard Fruit monopolies and the overwhelming presence of Chiquita and Bonita stickers on bananas exported out of Ecuador, he prefers to focus on the invisible "chains" that increasingly distance producers from consumers as multinational corporations pursue financial profits. Financial subsidies granted by the CNC (Centre National du Cinéma) helped bear the costs incurred while shooting in Senegal and Ecuador. It can be noted that this funding system, quite typical of France, is known as *avance sur recettes* and can be partially sustained through revenues generated not only by French films but also foreign films shown at French theaters. Back to the "chains" rhetorically dismantled throughout the film, it is important to observe that in that regard, Moullet initially borrows from militant cinema.

As he visits a tuna cannery in Senegal, one shot captures perfectly the complexity of global capitalism's multi-directional and multi-level backbone: a gigantic assemblage of crisscrossing metal belts and supporting poles fill up the entire frame. Luc Moullet's voice-over explains:

> "Our effort to understand the ingenuity of the chain, and the picturesque quality of its role in the packaging assembly line of tuna cans or in the fourth line of banana production, where supermarket orders are packaged in Rungis, leads us to forget how cruel the work that eats up most of the life of hundreds of million of human beings can be."[6] [open endnotes in new window]

Every food ingredient goes through a multi-step process.
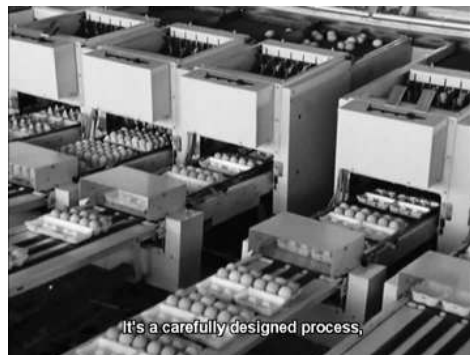
Eggs are sorted out, packed and carefully conditioned.

Tuna cans go through the same process, moving along conveyor belts.

In France, crates of bananas imported from Ecuador are checked in before being loaded onto trucks and trains.

While men are still needed, much of the process has been increasingly mechanized.

The Fordist and later Taylorist models targeted by militant cinema, both epitomized by the fragmenting and alienating nature of the assembly line, becomes in *Origins of a Meal* an intricate network of local, regional, national and international mechanisms. Focusing on three distinct products allows Moullet to multiply the production lines depicted. Early in the film, Luc Moullet details in voice-over the processes involved for each of the food items (10" 40-14"):

> "As for the egg, it goes through two production lines. First: laying. Second: packing. After candling which sorts out any bad eggs, they're graded into five classifications. If an egg weighs less than the standard for any of the 5 grades, it slides to the right, into the next grade down. If it's too heavy, it slips down to the level below. It's a carefully designed process, the only one in this films in which workers change roles, which avoids the monotony of a life spent repeating the same movements. Tuna goes through two processes. Here we see the canning in Dakar. Let's take a moment to appreciate the ingenuity of the production line and the toy-like beauty of the can-making machinery or the banana's fourth stage of processing: supermarket packaging at Rungis. [...] This is the third stage of the process: checking in the crates in Dieppe. A mechanism is installed on board the ship. It will carry the bananas at the sorting center, along an aerial conveyor belt. From there, they're loaded onto a train, or a lorry. [...] the second phase takes place [in Machala, Ecuador]: loading the ships for Dieppe. Nearby, the first phase: the harvest."

In Ecuador, much of the loading labor is still done by bare hands and strong backs.

Each step will be revisited at greater length and expanded from the workers', trade unionists' or business representatives' perspectives during the film. We later learn, for example, that the mechanization of Dieppe's docks is responsible for job losses or that operating the beautiful can-making machine is a man's job in Dakar. But most importantly, the narrative expansion of these multi-step processes throughout the film reveals two other shadow chains that cannot be ignored: first, the structures of exploitation that keep costs low and profits high and, second, the collateral waste that in 1978 was only slowly coming under scrutiny.

In Senegal, public transportation has yet to develop; Thérèse, who works in a cannery in Dakar, comments on footage recorded in small remote villages and explains ...

... how much time and money she spends on transportation each month. Throughout the film, she tells Luc Moullet about her life and her work.

These are not presented in a linear manner. *Origins of a Meal* meticulously unfolds all links that make each of these chains by editing individual interviews and geographically dispersed footage into a dialogic mosaic. On some occasions, this dialogue emphasizes parallels, as is the case with a long section of the film that addresses the social benefits, or lack of, enjoyed by Ecuadorean and Senegalese workers. (1' 07" 35-1' 11" 38) Other times, it highlights discrepancies, especially when it comes to the working conditions of French workers in comparison to their counterparts in Senegal and Ecuador.

Trucks take freshly cut banana bunches to the port of Machala.

Many children work on Ecuadorean plantations.

Structures of exploitation can either repeat themselves in similar ways across the three processes or vary based on national cultures. In Ecuador, an obvious form of exploitation concerns child labor. Although the film does not pass any explicit moral judgment on the issue, it visibly appears in several sequences shot in the Machala's area. Teenage boys can be seen weighing banana bunches, hand-washing green bananas, sticking labels on individual fruits ready to move on to the next step, or as explains Anselmo Loyola, a young plantation worker, they also work as dockers as young as eleven years old. (1' 42" 58) He himself started working eight hours a day when he was eight. After finishing work around 6 p.m., he goes to school between 7 and 11 p.m.. In Senegal, exploitation derives directly from the former colonial order: salaries are lower for Senegalese fishermen than for the French expatriates recruited from Brittany. Although Senegal's public transportation is notorious for delays and inconsistent schedules, women who travel up to two hours morning and evening from the villages to Dakar canneries can be denied clocking in if they arrive late in the morning. Overall, wage disparities tend to be reluctantly tolerated and finally accepted, as a Senegalese fisherman confirms, because unemployment remains high in Dakar. For those who do find themselves unemployed, another system of exploitation awaits them: local corruption.

The promotion of monoculture by large business groups threatens the sustainability of local economies and has become a great cause of famines.

More insidiously, monoculture causes great harm to local economies and populations. Vast land surfaces have been appropriated by foreign companies to mass produce one single product, banana in Ecuador, peanuts in Senegal, and so on, exacerbating local famine, poverty and public health concerns while keeping Western consumers satisfied. Moullet mentions in passing that Senegalese people do not like tuna and Ecuadorians do not really eat that many bananas in the first place. A Senegalese fisherman explains that until recently people would sell tuna for nothing rather than eating it; they simply did not know how to cook it. Yet, as tuna became more widely available, people started learning how to prepare and eat it more willingly. (1' 00" 06)

Although the issue of monocultural land use is not further developed in the film, it has certainly become a recurrent and prominent theme in recent films: echoing French, Indian and Brazilian activists' claims, films such as *Solutions Locales pour un Désordre Global* (Coline Serreau, 2010, France), *The World according to Monsanto* (Marie-Monique Robin, 2008, France) and *King Corn* (Aaron Wolf, 2007, USA) among numerous others, have documented the destructive impact of monoculture on societies, local agriculture, and the environment both worldwide.

A third thread, which remains fairly underdeveloped in the film, concerns the collateral waste generated by the food trades. Towards the end of the documentary, Luc Moullet adopts a slightly more condemning tone in his comments spoken over footage showing heaps of bananas being thrown away while many "people go hungry." For Moullet, throwing "30% of all bananas" is an "absurdit[y] of the system." (1' 23" 45) Like the production and distribution process, waste is methodically decomposed in several stages. Bananas are sorted not once but twice, and those that do not match required weight and measurements are discarded just like eggs during the conditioning phase. Ironically, this makes the Ecuadorean production process more rigorous than its direct competitors, Guadeloupe and Martinique, whose bananas have been repeatedly praised by French grocers, wholesalers and consumers throughout the film. (1' 24" 26) A worker confides in Moullet that "there have been occasions when about 600 crates were thrown away," not necessarily because they had gone bad but simply because they did not meet Western consumers' criteria. Images of perfectly edible bananas being fed to cattle or washing away on shores surrounded with material waste raise questions about Western affluence's collateral damage, especially after having heard nurses, workers and local business owners complain about sanitary concerns and diseases caused by poor diet or stained water. The same thing happens to fish in Senegal, where fishermen are asked to throw back small catches into the sea.

The unpurified water can lead to parasitosis.
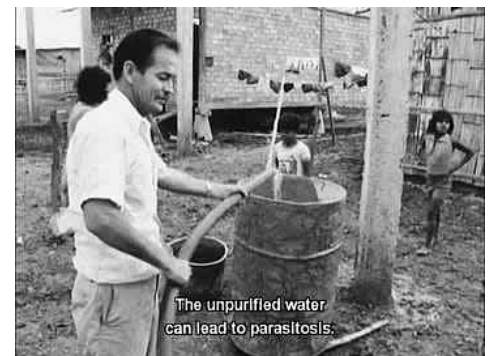
Although a top player in the international food trade, Ecuador remains extremely poor.

Many communities do not have access to clean water.

Yet, while children starve, tons of bananas are thrown away on a regular basis.

Bananas can also be used to feed cattle.

This is the home of a French worker from the egg factory.

FICHET-BAUCHE

In spite of French workers' stagnant wages, they have access to the comfort of a modern life: television, nice homes, and other amenities.

Many French people own a car and cars often travel half empty.

Where militant cinema focused essentially on local conditions and empowering workers in their immediate environment through strikes and political organization, *Origins of a Meal* emphasizes how by extending the "chain of production," global capitalism successfully undermines labor's political unity and de-humanizes not only production but consumption as well. In a more recent interview recorded on the occasion of a programming series celebrating his career, Luc Moullet justified his deviations from the militant cinema of the late 1960s:

> "After May 68, militant films were booming, but they often lacked precision: they talked about oppression and struggles but failed to go to the source, labor. This is why I went to South America, Africa and Picardie to observe what was really taking place, leaving out any preconceived ideas I may have. I filmed the chain of production of several products, the working conditions of employees, and the living conditions of livestock. It was a fascinating work of investigation, especially since nobody had ever shot in Ecuador or Senegal before to study the economy of banana and tuna production. This film was both ahead of its time and the more recent explosion of documentary films about food business, but also behind if we consider critical accounts that had already been published, René Dumont's writings for instance."[7]

This retrospective statement tactfully points to the obsessive and quite narrow-minded focus of militant cinema, which turned the political affirmation of workers into a cinematic event. In other words, in Moullet's view, theoretical abstraction misguided his fellow filmmakers away from the actual scope of the problem. He simultaneously concedes his own failures at integrating the emerging ecological concerns of the time into his work.

Since the 1990s, U.S. imperialism and corporate culture have been blamed for social and environmental damages, a position which has enabled filmmakers to avoid addressing French neo-colonial practices in Africa as well as the persistence of economic inequalities in overseas territories.[8] If in 1978, derivatives and virtual commodities had not taken over economic transactions as they now have, one could nonetheless see in Moullet's focus on the chain, such a basic mechanism of industrial capitalism, an attempt to demystify the unfathomable dimension of global capitalism—which has been stressed by its proponents to facilitate the assumed ineluctability of neoliberalism. At a time when industrial production was slowing down in European and North American countries, *Origins of a Meal* offers some keys to understand the global redistribution of economic roles. Production has gradually been displaced to what was then referred to as Third World countries, known today as the Global South, while Western populations are increasingly defined as the global economy's consumers of goods manufactured in countries where labor rights have yet to be asserted and defended.

## Consumers' maps: a documentary filmmaker's politics

I will now conclude this analysis of *Origins of a Meal* with a consideration of the second central shift in Moullet's engagement with the globalizing economy: the increased role of consumers' responsibility and the filmmaker's subjective repositioning in documentary politics. Including the spectators in the chain of production and their central role as consumers in determining value departs from traditional militant cinema. To a large extent, the sinuous structure of the narrative through economic, political and geographical entanglements leaves the spectator/consumer aware of the profound injustices holding the system together while erasing the line previously drawn between exploited and exploiters. As a consumer, the spectator is inevitably part of the system criticized by the film. About halfway through the film, Luc Moullet addresses directly the French spectator at the end of a short statement that describes the latest form of exploitation through consumption patterns:

Antonietta Pizzorno strips naked to show the extent to which Western consumers depend on far-off manufacturing, textile industries and food trades.

> "French people benefit from the wage extortion taking place in the tuna industry: by buying at a very low cost products coming from Third world countries, they take away their purchasing power and waste it. Everybody takes advantage: those who exploit and those who are exploited, rich and poor. You, spectator, you take advantage; and I do too! But to what extent do we in fact benefit from this high purchasing power?"

As he makes this declaration, images of standardized apartment buildings and French people buying produce at a market or checking out in a supermarket bracket a quick shot of Ecuadorean farmers running through the banana plantations with loads on their backs. This short interjection directed at the spectator in the middle of the film both condenses the general structure of the film —cheap labor abroad enables Western consumers, and workers, to gain access to low-cost food items and to maintain a comfortable lifestyle—and draws attention to the paradoxically damaging effect of this new affluence on health. Shortly after, an expert, French researcher Philippe d'Iribarne, interviewed by Moullet, will explain that Western dietary habits cause new diseases, for instance, in the same way that poverty is responsible for deficiencies and physical ailments. Moreover, as Moullet's partner uninhibitedly demonstrates in front of the camera, if it were not for all the commodities imported from abroad, Western consumers would find themselves stripped naked. It is this double bind affecting all consumers and producers—populations in France and in the countries where production is being relocated as well as the militant filmmaker himself—which *Origins of a Meal* reveals.
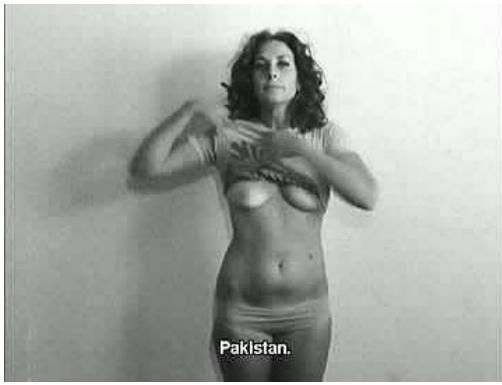
Clothes come from Korea, Pakistan or Vietnam.

Yet, rather than adopting a condescending and moralizing attitude towards the spectators, Luc Moullet concludes the film by acknowledging his own hypocrisy, questioning thereby the nature (if not the possibility) of militancy in this holistic, or rather inescapable, system as the filmmaker describes in the last few minutes of the film. This also anticipates, to a large extent, more recent representations of globalization and neo-liberal capitalism as an all-encompassing, and therefore totalizing, machine. By embodying the ambivalent position of Western individual subjects, Moullet modifies the didactic mission of 1968 militant cinema. *Origins of a Meal* is more about using documentary to reflect on the changing referentiality of the world now that it is globalizing than exposing the ideological undercurrents of traditional cinematic representations—which militant cinema did to varying degrees. Luc Moullet's voice-over concluding remarks at the end of *Origins of a Meal* question both his problematic position as a French filmmaker and the more general ethical dilemma he is faced with as his investigative process reproduces the structures of social and economic inequalities it seeks to denounce:

> "Even our film contributes to exploitation. My technicians requested to stay in the only hotel in Machata that had hot water, which would make the owner, a well-off banana plantation owner, slightly richer than he is already. Our driver had no choice but wait for us for hours. My budget being limited, I paid 50 Francs for interviews in the Third World but 120 Francs in France. But I can get moral, and maybe even, material advantages from my film. Obsessed by my film and the impact I thought it could have, I forgot immediate actions I could have taken then. I was so ashamed of being French in Dakar that I preferred running away. I would walk through empty streets to avoid encounters while I should have sought them. So many people sleep in the streets, but I preferred to keep the bed next to mine in my hotel room empty by fear that the subsidy hidden under my pillow would get stolen. And to choose my shots, I found myself in the same position as supervisors in the canning factory as if knowledge itself was just a subtle form of exploitation."[9]

With this list of inconsistencies, Luc Moullet calls into question the ethical impasse that may be the essence and the strength of his documentary filmmaking. However, unlike past theoretical and aesthetic subversions of film's ideological nature, Moullet does not target here the seductive nature of cinema as deployed through technological and narrative features.

Although I see in *Origins of a Meal* the crystallization of ideas and representations that are now central to the alterity pursued by *altermondialist* movements, Luc Moullet's self-scrutiny by the end of his film conflates the filmmaker with the many personas he has endorsed throughout the film: advocate, consumer, producer, colonizer, supervisor, exploited, exploiter, and so on. By mediating the exploitative nature of the inescapable economic rationalization of human interactions, Luc Moullet embodies here Fredric Jameson's "aesthetic of cognitive mapping." The documentary becomes, therefore, the means by which as "individual subject" the filmmaker negotiates

> "some new heightened sense of [his] place in the global system [...] this enormously complex representational dialectic" (54).[10]

Jameson's aspirations for "the new political art" finds in *Origins of a Meal* one possible materialization. Here Moullet explores the political and ethical potential of the latest capacity of the documentary

> "mode [to] represent [the world space of multinational capital], in which we may again begin to grasp our positioning as individual and collective subjects and regain a capacity to act and struggle which is at present neutralized by our spatial as well as our social confusion" (54). [11]

By going South, Luc Moullet does not only go to labor, what is in his view the source of exploitation; he also undertakes a geographical, social and political repositioning of the filmmaker as engaged global citizen, a role which filmmakers have widely embraced in the last ten years. In that regard, Luc Moullet's documentary explores questions similar to Michael Chanan's recent discussion of documentary filmmaking's "cognitive geography" (149).[12] There is in *Origins of a Meal* a similar intention to what Chanan demands: "producing a critical history" and "a cognitive geography that respond[s] to different coordinates (different, not opposite)"

> "means, first and foremost, being critical of the dominant historiography, which reads from North to South, as if it were top down." (152)

Moullet's documentary deconstructs this top down approach. According to Chanan's classification, Moullet's film would probably still be a case of asymmetrical gaze, expressing a Western view. Although the intellectual reflection that drives *Origins of a Meal* is really the result of a dialogic encounter between Moullet, the many people he interviews and films, and spectators, he holds the camera and controls the editing. However, this film reveals a blind spot in Chanan's call for new cognitive geographies in globalizing documentary practices. Chanan remains focused on the "return of the [exoticized] gaze" as a "coordinate" that has been systematically marginalized in the history of documentary. *Origins of a Meal* adds one coordinate that has equally been overlooked, one where those who have held the camera turned it on their own hypocrisy to face it.

As a French man in Dakar, Luc Moullet faces his own role in this system.

He can afford to sleep in a double bedroom alone even though people live on the streets of Dakar.

As a filmmaker, he finds himself prying on Senegalese and Ecuadorean workers.

In that regard, his position puts him in the shoes of the French supervisors managing factories in Senegal.

As a social filmmaker, Moullet is in an ethical impasse: banking on the long-term moral return of his film, he turns his back on the poverty that surrounds him.

Ashamed of his French identity, he runs away.

With *Origins of a Meal*, an insightful documentary about the globalization of the economy and the metamorphic nature of colonial and imperialist pursuits, Luc Moullet grasps the inadequacy of old models and forms of militant cinema to accommodate the non-binary nature of the current global system and the necessarily subjective and personal implication of the filmmaker. From his debut film on, Moullet always saw the budget constraints of his cinema as being an integral part of his aesthetic pursuits; in fact, he rejected the systematic division established between artistic vision and financial expertise:

> "When I wanted to produce my first feature-length film, I didn't have any money. So I was forced to rethink the economic system of production. In the end, it's something fascinating. It's generally thought that the economic side of filmmaking is a bloody nuisance for a filmmaker, and that it doesn't correspond to his "vocation." I think that finance is something too important to entrust to financiers."[13]

The financial modesty of *Origins of a Meal* is tangible from the handwritten credits that open and close the film to the homemade quality of everyday life scenes filmed with his lover Antoinetta Pizzorno at lunch. By the end of the film, the economic and aesthetic elements of documentary cinema merge with a third "nuisance," namely the ethical responsibility of the filmmaker himself, which also becomes integral to the "vocation" of the documentary filmmaker in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Foreshadowing recent *altermondialist*/anti-globalization accounts, Luc Moullet's film effectively casts light on the triangular relation that neo-liberal capitalism puts forth between labor, consumption and citizenship. In spite of its date, *Origins of a Meal* unleashes a much stronger critical analysis than the recent wave of documentaries towards the neo-liberal practices of France. Recent social movements gathered in Seattle, Porto Alegre or Mumbai have embraced the idea of a vast borderless society. But they tend to shift the blame to the profit-driven expansion of neoliberalism globally,

condemning corporate disregard for human well being and social justice while downplaying local and national strategic complacency with such direction. In the last forty years, *Origins of a Meal* has continued to fuel debates in cine-clubs and festivals. Its resonance with contemporary activism in and off the screens has played a central role in the longevity of this film's small, but continuous, success.

[Go to notes page](#)

Notes

1. Sally Shafto, "Luc Moullet's Food Lessons: *Origins of a Meal*," *Gastronomica*, 10, 3, (Summer 2010), 93-96.

> "In addressing economic and dietary concerns long before the current wave of food documentaries, *Origins of a Meal* goes beyond these later films in its wide-ranging conclusions. It is a *film à charge* against Western capitalism, particularly in its French and American manifestations." [return to text]

2. This quote comes from an interview Luc Moullet gave to his friend and fellow filmmaker and critic Gérard Courant for *Cinéma 80*. Asked about the reception of *Origins of a Meal* in France upon its release, Moullet admits that overall, the film was positively received except for a few voices in the Communist Party and the Extreme-Right.

> "It doesn't go without clashing with the Communist Party's selfish and opportunistic attitude. Their slogan has not changed over time: their only goal has been increasing the wages of French workers so they can have purchase more and live more comfortably. Of course, inequalities in wages and lifestyles need to be lowered. But it can be very dangerous to let people believe that they will get dramatically higher wages and live more comfortably if employers are deprived of the money they have stolen from workers." (English translation is mine)
> Gérard Courant, "Entretien avec Luc Moullet," *Cinéma 80*, 255, March 1980, available at
> http://www.gerardcourant.com/index.php?t=ecrits&e=147

3. Mathilde Blottière, "Luc Moullet : 'J'aime la manière dont mon frère, assez primitif de nature, découpe son steak'," *Télérama*, January 12, 2010. Available at
http://www.telerama.fr/cinema/luc-moullet-j-aime-la-maniere-dont-mon-frere-assez-primitif-de-nature-decoupe-son-steak,51511.php.

4. Gérard Courant, "Entretien avec Luc Moullet," *Cinéma 80*, 255, March 1980, available at
http://www.gerardcourant.com/index.php?t=ecrits&e=147.
English translation is mine. [return to page 2]

> "J'ai essayé de diversifier au maximum les aliments en les choisissant d'origines très diverses. C'eût été travestir la réalité que

de choisir uniquement des aliments venant de France. Ici, ils proviennent de trois origines: la France, le 'Tiers-monde français' et le 'Tiers-Monde étranger'."

5. The term *altermondialisme* entered common parlance in France in the early years of the past decade, and has since been widely used in France to refer to the grassroots movements that have virulently rejected what they see as neoliberal hegemony. As a result, their prime targets have been financial institutions, U.S. imperialist policies, multinational corporations, and international institutions of governance (the IMF, the World Bank and the WTO as well as intergovernmental summits like the G8 and the G20). Their motto, "another world is possible," epitomizes their conception of a world where local concerns have a global impact, and vice versa. Unlike early rejections of globalization, *altermondialisme* accepts the global interconnectedness of human societies; what is fought is the economic and financial globalization of markets and trades to the expense of human, environmental and social justice.

6. This is a transcription of Luc Moullet's comments over a long sequence of footage filmed along the many segments of the line of production that often originates abroad and ends with the daily consumption by Western consumers of such common food items as bananas, eggs and tuna.

> "Notre effort pour comprendre l'ingéniosité de la chaîne et le pittoresque de son côté joué dans la chaîne de montage des boîtes de thon ou dans la quatrième chaîne de la banane, le conditionnement à Rungis pour les supermarchés, tend à nous faire oublier la cruauté de ce travail qui engloutit la plus grande part de la vie de centaines de millions d'hommes." (The English translation is mine)
> [return to page 3]

7. Mathilde Blottière, "Entretien avec Luc Moullet," *Télérama*, (13 janvier 2010), available at http://www.telerama.fr/cinema/luc-moullet-j-aime-la-maniere-dont-mon-frere-assez-primitif-de-nature-decoupe-son-steak,51511.php

> "A la suite de Mai 68, les films militants fleurissaient, mais ils manquaient souvent de précision: ils parlaient d'oppression et de conflits sans retourner à la source, le travail. C'est la raison pour laquelle je suis allé en Amérique du Sud, en Afrique et en Picardie pour voir comment ça se passait réellement, sans idées préconçues. J'ai suivi la filière de fabrication d'un certain nombre de produits, j'ai vu les conditions de travail des salariés, les conditions de vie et d'élevage des animaux. C'était un travail d'enquête passionnant, d'autant que personne encore n'était jamais allé tourner en Equateur ou au Sénégal pour se pencher sur l'économie de la banane ou du thon. Le film était à la fois en avance par rapport à tous ces documentaires sur l'alimentation qu'on voit aujourd'hui sur les écrans, et en retard par rapport à toute une littérature sur la question: les écrits de René Dumont, par exemple."

René Dumont was one of the fathers of contemporary ecology: focusing as early as the 1950s on the long-term damages of productivism on world food resources, energy policies, he was among the first people to promote "sustainable development" in opposition to the Green Revolution. This term was used to describe the modernization and mechanization of agriculture in the first half of the 20th century. In 1992, Bernard Baissat directed the film *René Dumont, citoyen de la planète / René Dumont, a citizen of the Earth* for French television. More recently, French Canadian filmmaker Richard D. Lavoie released, with the support of the National Film Board, a 25 mn-long video portrait of the agricultural scientist and activist *René Dumont, l'homme-siècle/René Dumont: Global Ecologist* (2001).

8. The recent labor struggles in Martinique and Guadeloupe in 2009-2010 illustrate perfectly how social unrest remains tied to the financial and business monopoly of families who came from metropolitan France and settled over time.

9.

> "Même notre film participe à l'exploitation. Mes techniciens réclamèrent le seul hôtel de Machata à eau chaude, enrichissant ainsi un peu plus son propriétaire, un bananier bien nanti. Notre chauffeur était résigné à nous attendre des heures. Mon budget étant limité, je payais 50 F les interviews dans le Tiers-Monde et 120 F en France. Mais moi, je peux tirer du film un bénéfice moral et peut-être même matériel. Obsédé par mon film et la portée que je lui supposais, j'oubliais l'action immédiate que je pouvais avoir. Je préférais la fuite tant on ressent à Dakar la honte d'être français. Je marchais au milieu des rues les plus désertes pour éviter les rencontres alors que j'aurais dû les rechercher. Beaucoup dorment dehors, mais je laissais vide l'autre lit de ma chambre craignant qu'on me vole ma subvention cachée sous mon oreiller. Et pour choisir mes images, je me trouvais ressembler aux surveillants des conserveries du Sénégal comme si la connaissance n'était qu'une forme subtile de l'exploitation."

10. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 54.

11. Ibid., 54.

12. Michael Chanan, "Going South: On Documentary as a Form of Cognitive Geography," *Cinema Journal*, 50, 1, (2010), 148-153.

13. Sally Shafto, "Luc Moullet, a Bootleg Filmmaker at the Centre Pompidou," *Senses of Cinema*, 57, (2009) available at http://www.sensesofcinema/2009/feature-articles/luc-moullet-pompidou/

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Truth in the mix: Frederick Wiseman's construction of the observational microphone

by Giovanna Chesler

A version of this essay was first published in German in *Frederick Wiseman, Kino des Sozialen* (Ed. Eva Hohenberger, Vorwerk 8, 2009, pp. 139-155)

As he explores the connections between technological developments and documentary practice and form in *Claiming the Real* and *Claiming the Real II*, Brian Winston acknowledges the new threat to documentary posed by digital photographic manipulations and CGI:

> "The diffusion of this technology…is taking-decades. Nevertheless, it is not hard to imagine that, by the end of this process, every documentarist will have to hand, in their video-editing laptop, the wherewithal for complete fakery. Technology, by finally and irrevocably dissolving the connection between the image and the imaged, must therefore have a significant potential impact on the documentary film. The camera's capacity to capture the real will not be erased by this, but a far greater sophistication on the part of the audience will be needed to determine documentary's authenticity. (2008, 9)

For me, this attention to digital image manipulation as the ultimate manipulative practice evidences a foregrounding of the documentary image in truth debates. Yet the soundtracks of documentary films, carefully constructed, invisibly edited, and easily manipulated, provide a bed of truth upon which documentarians stake their claims and construct their narratives. Soundtracks and their relationship to the image must be considered as a primary method for 'fakery' in documentary film. Yet, to attend to the manipulations afforded by sound editing, we need not condemn documentary practice as a whole. Indeed I shall rely upon Winston's arguments from *Claiming the Real* to save our cherished practice.

Here I turn my attention to the mix of observational cinema, and to a filmmaker brilliantly emblematic of this mode of documentary, Frederick Wiseman. I shall explore the use of sound in two of his films: *High School* (1969), Wiseman's portrait of the institutionalized power dynamics between students, teachers and parents of Northeast High School, a school

Wiseman at work. Peg Skorpinski photo.

situated in a middle class neighborhood in Philadelphia, and *Domestic Violence* (2001) a study of the women and children's domestic violence shelter The Spring in Tampa Bay, Florida. These films stand as prime examples of observational cinema, but are connected here for the striking significance of sound thematically in these works. I highlight the sound editing practices Wiseman employs, while attending to Wiseman's use of music and volume in his explorations of gender and power within the institutions observed by these films.

Frederick Weisman. Photo: Lisa Gross.

"Mommy if you just be quiet": dialogue editing for continuity

G R Levin: "During the shooting, you do the sound, and somebody else shoots. You're the one, I take it, who chooses the scenes to shoot?"

Frederick Wiseman: "Right. And I work out signals with whomever I'm working with so that he knows the way I want to get the shot, and we talk very carefully both before, during and after the shooting about those stylistic things I like." (Levin 1971, 318)

In Wiseman, we find a filmmaker who is both editor and sound recordist. At the moment of recording, Wiseman, tethered to the audio recording equipment, focuses on the word and determines what images the cinematographer captures based on the audio. The microphone becomes a laser pointer, illuminating places of interest within a living scene, calling upon the cinematographer to follow its line toward the object worth filming. In this moment of listening and recording, we must imagine Wiseman as editor as well, already considering the moments where the voice will be selected for in the finished piece.

Condensation of time in *High School*:

Michael stands at the beginning of the
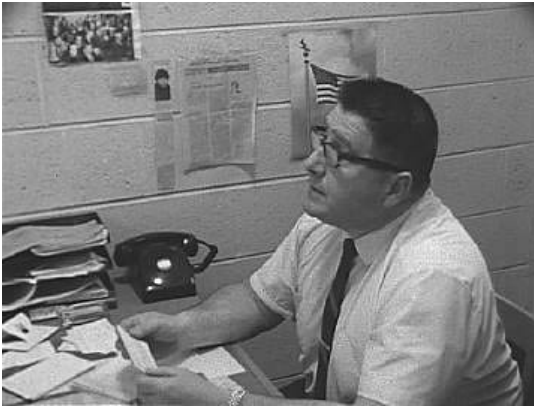
conversation.

Dr. Allen is seated throughout.

Dr. Allen's ring serves as a cutaway and cut point, condensing time in their conversation.

This close-up of Michael sitting suggests the re-organization of time in the edit.

Wiseman's filmmaking style falls within the tradition of observational documentary, often called Direct Cinema. This style of documentary production became popular with the advent of wireless synchronized sound recording technology and the movement away from 35mm toward 16mm cameras at the beginning of the 1960's. Makers employing this mode abandoned voice-over narration and evidentiary editing, privileging the observation of lived experience spontaneously (Nichols 2001, 110). The primacy of speech, recorded in the moment, altered the construction of documentaries:

> "Synchronized sound affected editing style. The silent-film editing tradition, under which footage was fragmented and then reassembled, creating 'film time,' began to lose its feasibility and value. With speech, 'real time' reasserted itself." (Barnouw 1993, 251)

In addition to structuring time, voice-over narration, often provides the glue holding together documentary films. Though heavy handed and authorial, voice-over narration allows the documentary editor to connect disparate images and moments. In their commitment to representing 'real time,' observational makers are challenged to present scenes that convey a reality of time as lived without the straightforwardness of an authorial voice. To achieve the construction of cohesive scenes, observational makers turned to the tradition of continuity established during the Silent Era (Ruoff 1993, 28.) In *Cross Cultural Filmmaking: A Handbook for Making Documentary and Ethnographic Films and Videos*, authors Barbash and Taylor translate the rules of continuity editing for a documentary audience:

> "watch out for potential jump cuts...try to overlap action from shot to shot...try to match spatial relationships, screen position, and eyeline from shot to shot...try to match lighting conditions...try to maintain a consistent screen direction... resort to cutaways to avoid a jump cut if need be...last, but not least, don't follow these prescriptions to the letter!" (1997, 389-397)

The style of observation in documentary challenges the film editor to create a story with a strong arc and to build scenes that have continuity and resolution which move the story arc forward.

In his earlier work, Wiseman began with approximately 90,000 feet of film, or 42 hours of raw material and condensed this into 3,000 feet, or 1.5 of hours for the finished film (Wiseman in Atkins, 1976, 35 & 47). Presently, his films run between two-and-a-half and four-and-a-half hours. According to his own calculations, he uses about 3% of what he shoots in his final film (Grant 2006, xi). In the introduction of published transcripts in *5 Films by Frederick Wiseman*, Wiseman notes his challenges as an editor and the relationships between condensing time in documentary film and methods of fiction filmmaking:

> "For me the making of a documentary film is in some ways the reverse of making a fiction film. With fiction, the idea for the film is transformed into a script by the imagination and work of the writer and/or director, which obviously precedes the shooting of the film. In my documentaries the reverse is true: The film is finished when, after editing, I have found its "script." If a film of mine works, it does so because the verbal

This edit confirms the space of the scene.

More time has been removed. Michael has returned to standing, either through a reorganization of time to an earlier moment or in removing the moment when he stood up.

Editing a conversation in *Domestic Violence*:

In a session from *Domestic Violence*, a woman shares her story while others listen.

and pictorial elements have been fused into dramatic structure. This is the result of the compression, condensation, reduction, and analysis that constitute the editing process for me."(Grant 2006, xi)

Though not explicit in his method, I believe that Wiseman's emphasis on the "script" of the documentary suggests an approach to editing that begins with sound. I term this method of documentary editing *sound-up construction* and believe it to be popular amongst documentary editors, though not so named as a method. Authors of popular handbooks on documentary filmmaking advise makers to produce transcripts of recorded dialogue and create paper edits from those transcripts as a principle step in documentary film editing (Chapman 2007, Barbash and Taylor 1997, Rabiger 2004.) In paper edits, sentences are strung together, time is condensed and sense is made of lived moments through the words connected on the page.[1] [open endnotes in new window] I do not wish to argue that editors of observational documentaries, including Wiseman, rely *only* upon the written word to construct their films. Rather, I wish to point to the role of sound as an architectural foundation of observational documentaries. For instance, later in the *5 Films* introduction, Wiseman connects the use of dialogue with the other elements he considers as an editor, but again, dialogue is primary:

> "My work as editor, like that of the writer of a fiction film, is to try to figure out what is going on in the sequence I am watching on the editing machine. What is the significance of the words people use, the relevance of tone or changes of tone, pauses interruptions, verbal associations, the movement of eyes, hands, and legs?" (xi)

As the base of the documentary edit, words on paper can be moved with ease, but in the mix, rearranging of words happens in degrees. Technically, it is quite difficult to bring sound from one location to another location, as all sound recording carries with it a spatial signature, or mark of the location in which it was recorded (Altman 1988). But within one location during one episode of filming, sound proves malleable. Words, phrases, sentences and paragraphs may be moved around allowing for a compression of time and an arrangement, or rearrangement, of a conversation. Wiseman's sequences, which may range in lengths of two minutes to ten minutes, typically build from medium close ups which privilege the person speaking at the time. This framing renders the speaker in a space that may not be understood until a wide shot establishes the other listeners and speakers in the room. Typically, the camera follows the conversation, panning between speakers, maintaining medium close ups on each. Dialogue editing and, thereby, the condensing of time, occurs when the medium close up is disrupted by a cutaway.

Woman listens, perhaps to her own memories.

Woman listens.

A woman tells her story.

The editing reveals the people around her.

In *High School* Wiseman uses the cutaway to maintain logical dialogue progression in the conversation between Dr. Allen and student Michael who fights for his principals by refuting the detention he has been given. A cutaway to Dr. Allen's ring offers an opportunity to condense part of a conversation. In another moment, the technique of condensing time occurs between two edits as Michael inexplicably sits, and then returns to standing. The seated moment is identifiable through an analysis of the camera height and Dr. Allen's eyeline match. However, the continuity in this conversation between Dr. Allen and Michael, and the pace of the dialogue editing does not explicitly reveal that time has passed between these shots or that they have been rearranged and brought together sequentially. However, the words have been rearranged though they convey the meaning Wiseman initially observed in the sequence. In the interests of time and dramatic action, Wiseman has made an editorial decision to link two separate moments.

As in *High School*, the cut away in *Domestic Violence* serves to condense time and conversation. Cutaways function so that stories can be trimmed and shaped, while the meaning of the stories themselves and the impact of the teller's experience remain intact. Additionally, cutaways serve to surprise the viewer in ways fitting with the themes of the film. In the second half of *Domestic Violence*, Wiseman gives more time for stories to unfold and the camera lingers on the seemingly irrelevant twists and turns in the telling of a story (indeed, these twists are never irrelevant, but they demonstrate the way victims mask the worst parts of their experience.) Eventually, the long take is disrupted as the image cuts to another woman sitting silently next to the speaker who has been commanding the floor of the session. He then cuts to another woman, also sitting silently nearby.

Through this style of editing and sound construction, Wiseman doubles, then triples, then quadruples the silent bodies within the 'safe' space of the group, noting that most have yet to speak. These silent women vary in their listening styles: some look away, others look toward. Some react while others are distantly listening to their own memories. In these segments, carefully over the course of the film, Wiseman expresses the repetitive silencing endured by victims of domestic violence. The cutaway, placed within an extended story, and placed on top of the voice of a woman telling her story, both hides sound edits, but importantly attends to the fact that most within this space are not able to speak…yet.

Click here to play audio clip: "Mommy be quiet."

Wiseman's techniques in sound editing preserve continuity when the image may suggest a break. During a group meeting on brain washing techniques in *Domestic Violence*, an older woman with a whispery voice speaks to the ways in which she was silenced:

> "He had my son and my daughter telling me, if you just shut your mouth. Mommy if you just be quiet. Mommy, don't say anything. Mommy if you just stop. If you just be quiet you won't get hit. But they don't understand. Even if you're quiet you're going to get hit."

Visual track in *Domestic Violence* accompanying audio, "Mommy be quiet" :

The microphone moves to a whispered story. This wide shot allows for continuity through barely perceptible asynchronicity.

This shot covers for the audio without image.

Sync is established as the camera, and the edit, find the person speaking.

The speech starts with a wide shot demonstrating the woman's position in the room and the logics of space in this meeting. However her mouth movement and voice are not in synch in this wide shot. The next cut is someone else listening with a baby, and then a medium close up on the speaker. Now her lips and words move together. The technique of replacing dialogue upon the moving mouth of a social actor typically appears in documentary during a wide shot where the mouth movement cannot be read with specificity. Dialogue replacement may also occur when the camera's lens privileges a character's cheek, hiding the social actor's mouth. Though the mouth is turned and lips may not be read, the cheek's movement suggests that words are articulated.

This is a common practice in editing narrative films; a turned cheek and mouth blurred in a wide shot, provide opportunities for automated dialogue replacement (ADR.) Here we see Wiseman use the technique to cover the speaker when the camera was likely to be focused somewhere else or it was being reloaded. In some cases, he uses this technique to change a character's line of action, ellipsing a tangential story. This serves in condensing time and space, particularly for Wiseman who has a 30:1 shooting ratio.

Even with logical dialogue progression, how are these jumps in time (replaced dialogue and images) masked in the mind of the viewer? Arguably, the illusion of 'real-time' as discussed by Barnouw begins this process. As explored, constructing real-time depends upon dialogue editing that follows logical, conversation progressions. Yet, these edits must be concealed and as makers borrowing from classical Hollywood traditions, observational documentarians work to hide the apparatus whenever possible. Voice-over narration, which aligns with the apparatus as it "becomes a 'voice on high,' ...a voice which speaks from a position of superior knowledge, and which superimposes itself 'on top' of the diegesis" (Silverman 1988, 48) is discarded. Proximity between the viewer and the text becomes possible through the absence of narration. Wiseman has described this relationship, stating that he avoids narration so that "there's no separation between the audience watching the film and the events in the film." (Wiseman in Atkins 1971, 43) In *Representing Reality*, Bill Nichols suggests proximity between the film text and the audience within this style of documentary film:

> "Even in observational films like *Primary, Jane* or *A Married Couple*, and especially in works by Fred Wiseman like *Hospital, High School,* or *Model,* the strong sense of an indexical bond between what occurred in front of the camera and its historical referent draws us not into the details of the everyday but also into the formulation of a perspective on these institutional domains of the real. We process the documentary not only as a series of highly authentic sounds and images that bear the palpable trace of how people act in the historical world, but as serial steps in the formation of a distinct, textually specific way of seeing or thinking." (1991, 29)

By veiling the apparatus and relying on continuity, observational documentaries allow for the indexicality Nichols describes.[2] The seamlessness of the soundtrack builds a foundation for this indexicality: time represented as a flow of words, which progress logically, without (audible) breaks.

Visual track opening *Domestic Violence:*

An impersonal, phallic urban setting opens the film.

The swoosh of a cop car introduces the first moment of domestic violence in the film.

A victim is taken away from her abusive home while her screams are attenuated by the gauze.

"Simple Simon Says":
ambience and music as narrator

Wiseman's films are striking in that they do not build from the meaning translated through words alone, but through the suggestions and guidance provided by other components of his soundtracks beyond the voice. Though Wiseman elides voice-over narration in his films, his use of music in *High School* particularly, and the structuring of ambient tones in *Domestic Violence*, present a version of a narrator's voice, guiding the development of the thesis of the film, and commenting on the actions of the films' participants.

Ambient sound, typically picked up through an omnidirectional microphone, captures the whole of a sonic environment without privileging a specific sound source in a scene. These ambiences defy logics of listening practice as all sounds within a space are captured within a 360 degree area. *Domestic Violence* is structured through the placement of ambient tones which develop and change during the interludes between sequences.

Click to hear opening of *Domestic Violence* with ambient sounds. Midway through this clip, the sounds of the city roar before the swoosh of a cop car transitions us into a scene of *Domestic Violence.*

The film begins with the loud, nearly deafening roars of city highways in Tampa, Florida. Like Jacques Tati who used traffic patterns and deafening vehicular sounds in *Mon Oncle* to comment upon de-humanizing effects of modernity, Wiseman relies on a score of mechanical roars to open the film and establish a powerfully uncomfortable, dare I say patriarchal, tone that controls this community. In this ambient track, mass movements of air, represented by the tremendous low frequencies of traffic, chillingly contrast with the immobile, glassy office buildings that rise like masculine pillars of society and economy. Through a sound dissolve, the traffic sounds dissipate to the swoosh of a lone vehicle, a cop car, gliding through the greener, quieter space of a poor suburban neighborhood. The cop car takes the viewer to a house where a woman has been hit.

Soon thereafter, Wiseman returns to the violence of traffic sounds on city streets as he leads us into another scene where cops respond to a call related to domestic violence. In this scene, we meet a woman covered in blood who explains her injuries from within her darkened apartment. Indeed, the blood saturates her clothes and drips down her legs. An emergency worker gives her gauze to plug up her wounds, and she puts this gauze *into* her mouth and screams from behind it as she is moved from the apartment to the ambulance. As the victim traumatized by domestic violence, her voice can become part of the urban ambience only when attenuated. Indeed, attending to the attenuation of victim's voices within public space is the point of *Domestic Violence.*

Wiseman uses the ambient sound of The Spring, a shelter for women and children who are victims of domestic violence, to provide contrast with the

exterior environment. Within The Spring, words drive the meaning as women tell of trauma and abuse during intake meetings with counselors, and as shocking statistics are shared.[3] [open endnotes in new window] But ambient spaces of the quiet hallways, sprinkled with children's laughter, dictate the contrasting tone of this space from the world outside. The Spring's corridors bring women together as they enter with bags of clothes and car seats loaded with children. At times these interstitials are noisier than at other moments, particularly as the children run through or as a group of elder women receive a tour of the facility. But always, voices within the corridors are clearly differentiated. Volume is expressed, not out of anger and not to control, but rather for glee or agreement.

By generating these shifts in volume association within the walls of The Spring, Wiseman dilutes the connection between volume and power / violence, as he had established at the opening of the film. Now volume builds to represent community, safety and recovery. In this vein, at the close of *Domestic Violence*, the sound of traffic returns. Here, traffic sounds are placed in the space of night and are merely swooshes of tires on empty streets. The ambience beyond the shelter cannot overpower the viewer as it once did, for it has been unpacked and interrogated.

In *High School* diegetic music (music that appears to emanate from within the scene itself) functions as ambience, but has been arranged and orchestrated by Wiseman, as editor, to express the themes of the film and to build its thesis. Diegetic music in *High School* can rarely be read as such and at face value, save for a lesson on percussive instruments, and in an assembly where boys, dragging as cheerleaders, move on stage to tunes played by a school marching band. Even in the classroom where a teacher plays a recording of Simon and Garfunkel's "The Dangling Conversation" to her class, the music shifts from playing 'diegetically' to playing non-diegetically.

Music editing in a scene from *High School:*

The teacher plays a tape of "A Dangling Conversation" from this device, but we hear the song without ambience in the soundtrack.

Click to hear editing of beginning of Simon and Garfunkel song. As teacher begins Simon and Garfunkel's "A Dangling Conversation," the ambient sounds of the high school classroom fade away.

As the teacher begins to play the tape, the spatial signature of the room drops out of the recording altogether. The song plays while lacking the mark of its origination in the classroom. The montage edited with this song focuses on the tape itself, the teacher's response (insecurity and pleasure in this teaching moment), and to singles on the students, evidencing their interest and boredom.

Click to hear the final editing of the song. The song fades to ambient sounds of a box being dragged down the High School hallway.

As the song ends, it fades into ambient sounds from the hallway.

The music drifts into images in the hallway—a student leaning against the wall, someone dragging a box, and finally fades into another disciplinary moment in Dr. Allen's office. As the music floats across space (lacking the mark of space in the recording itself) and motivates this montage, the song associates with the author of the film text and performs as a narrator of these images.

Similarly, at the start of *High School*, a car approaches the neighborhood surrounding the school, then the school itself. This introduction to the setting for the film is paired with Otis Redding's tune "(Sittin' on) The Dock of the Bay." Later, music dictates the movements of girls in their gym class as the poppy song called "Simon Says" fills the soundtrack. In these cases,

the music is masked as diegetic—seemingly emanating from within the scene itself (the car speakers and speakers within the gymnasium respectively.) However, these songs indeed belong outside of the moment and have been placed by the editor of the film.

In her discussion of narrative film music, Claudia Gorbman considers the ways in which music is received by the viewer and the meaning music imparts based on its application in the film text. I argue that the use of music in observational documentary, like the use of continuity editing and dialogue editing, builds from traditions in narrative fiction film and cite Gorbman's work here based on connections outlined above between the formal traditions. Wiseman's use of music in the opening of the film and in the gym sequence, like Fellini in Gorbman's study, "deliberately blurs the line between diegetic and non-diegetic components of his filmic discourse" (1980, 197-8). Gorbman calls this questionable site of musical source "extradiegetic" and further, "metadiegetic" placing the music within a characters memory or internal, subjective space.

> "In reading music as metadiegetic or not, the issue is not its truth/falsity value—for music is not representational, and as such, cannot lie—but rather its connection to a secondary narrator at all. Although the question of "point-of-view music" demands rigorous analysis, we may agree that a metadiegetic reading depends on justification by narrative context and on other specific cinematic conventions." (198)

"Simple Simon Says" gym sequence in *High School*:

This shot suggests the song comes from this speaker in the moment, though the track itself lacks ambience. There are no sounds of the girls exercising, for example—the music is clean.

The *High School* sequence in which the bodies of young women swing, move, and stretch to the beat of a tune whose lyrics ironically dictate order and obedience, deserves attention. In Grant's discussion of *High School* in *5 Films* he describes this scene:

> "After questioning students on the telephone about their hall passes, the teacher looks through the window in a door as the pop song "Simple Simon" fades in on the soundtrack. The song's authoritative commands—similar to much of what we hear throughout *High School* –reinforce the film's overall view of the education process as impersonal and authoritarian. The film cuts from the teacher in the hallway peering through the window of the door into the gym, where girls in uniform are exercising to the song, and again we are encouraged to make a connection that the teacher was looking at this particular activity in the gym. Encouraged by both image and sound, viewers have often imputed a predatory sexuality to the teacher in the hallway, reading the camera's emphasis on the girls' buttocks as a point-of-view shot from the teacher's perspective." (2006, 6-7)

The teacher's look through a window certainly frames the sequence as his point-of-view, as Grant suggests. But Wiseman does not return to this

As "Simple Simon" plays, the girls follow instructions on proper body movement.

The camera objectifies the girls by fragmenting their bodies.

predatory observer during the extended sequence which would solidify this connection through the shot-reverse shot visual structure heretofore employed in *High School*. Rather, the camera remains in the gym, further developing fragmented images of the girl's bodies. The visual focus of the sequence builds around the girls' mid sections as the camera privileges their behinds and waists moving to the words "do it when Simon says, and you will never be out." In a moment where the source of this music is called into question, so too is the point-of-view of this sequence and also of the presence of a second narrator, as described by Gorbman above.

Wiseman pays particular attention to the gendered subject in *High School*. Throughout the 'day,' students learn about proper gendered attire, reproduction, and sexed body parts via aural instruction. A teacher reprimands a girl for the inappropriately short length of the girl's prom skirt. A group of female students are taught how to walk and carry their bodies, working around and against their awkward figures. These gender lessons appear through synch sound sequences, and incorporate the visual and aural structure we saw with Dr. Allen's scenes. The teacher speaks, the students listen, and time is compressed through edits in the sound track, covered by close ups, to produce conversations with continuity. But in the Simon Says sequence, the visual structure of *High School* drastically shifts. There is pleasure to be had in the upbeat tempo of the music and in the humor of watching bodies without heads swinging to the beat. For, by removing the head, and particularly, by fragmenting the body, Wiseman removes the potential rendering of these girls' subjectivity. The commanding music track, occupying all of the sonic space of this scene, presents both a heavy authorial voice articulating the loss of power by a group of students that is particular to gender, and simultaneously a male gaze deriving pleasure through this control.[4]

Kaja Silverman's work on female voice in the narrative fiction film, illuminates conventions in sound in Classical Hollywood cinema which restrict female characters by distancing them from the filmmaking apparatus. Through multiple techniques, including desynchronization and silence, female characters are differentiated from male characters, and pushed to a recessed space, inside of the story of the film. Silverman argues that within this recessed space, female characters are separated from the author of the film text. They cannot function as narrators or give voice to the direction of the film. (54) In *Into the Vortex* (2006), Britta Sjogren calls these strict gender-based assigns of the apparatus into question. She explores how female voice in certain works of 1940's film noir reveal difference and contradiction. In *High School*, by fragmenting young female bodies and removing the possibility for speech (by removing their heads in the frame), Wiseman creates a contradiction: he aligns the viewer with the principal who looks into the scene while trolling the halls, yet his awareness of patriarchal, gendered proscriptions is clearly apparent throughout the text. While one may consider that this view of the objectified girls represents the gaze of the documentary filmmaker, I wish to conclude that through this scene Wiseman reflexively acknowledges the qualities of cinema that allow for this type of gendered objectification. More relevantly, this gaze is underscored and dictated by the soundtrack itself as the musical beat allows for this disruption in the otherwise consistent style of the film up to this point.

High School: boys on stage dragging as cheerleaders, edited against audio of announcement about Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination.

Football players revel.

Another boy in drag.

High School: Gynecologist gives sex ed talk to boys in auditorium.

Volume and space: "I happen to be a gynecologist and get paid to do it."

I wish to extend a discussion of the alignment of male characters with the apparatus by considering volume of voice. By volume, I mean, quite literally, the amplitude of the sound wave carrying the voice of male characters onto the soundtrack of the film. In moments, male voices in *High School* are reflexively aligned with the apparatus. We see this with Simon Says silencing, to consciously negate female subjects. By selecting these moments, Wiseman, as author attends to a gendered difference in aural space.

Wiseman places two of the loudest moments in *High School* side by side, connecting them technically, but also thematically, as they both address constructions of masculinity.

Play audio juxtaposition of two key moments in *High School*'s editing. An announcement regarding Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination is edited against a drag performance by football players.

The first of the two outbursts in the sound mix occurs in the school assembly as a group of boys dragging as cheerleaders take the stage. A quiet moment precedes this scene as a teacher announces a scheduled discussion around Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination. Wiseman emphasizes the racist undertones at the school by cutting away immediately to an auditorium bursting with revelry. In this moment, white male students wearing pigtailed wigs and tight fitting cashmere sweaters bedecked with sparkle pasties take to a stage, dismissing the call for dialogue and mourning. The sound track is full of high, mid and low frequencies of great amplitude as the boys prance and dance in front of their audience. A mass of sound fills the screening space as the performance continues, in what may be read as derogatory dragging. This gendered and racialized disruption is manifest through distortions in the sound track pushing at the boundaries of volume and audio control.

In the scene that follows, the sound of boys performing gender again fills the soundtrack. I wish to focus here on the scene wherein a visiting gynecologist speaks to an auditorium of boys using excerpts from Grant's *5 Films* transcript:

"[*Cut to Medium Shot of gynecologist at microphone in front of auditorium filled with boys.*]

Gynecologist: ... [*taking a written question.*] 'Is it possible to impregnate a girl by rubbing the surface of the vagina?' With what? Your nose? No. [*Laughter and applause from boys.*] and I might add, this brings up one other good point. This brings up one other darn good point. Virginity is a state of mind. By that, I have seen several girls who have been physiologically, or by

The gynecologist laughs at his own joke, "What, with your nose?"

The boys attending the sex-ed lesson get excited.

After joke about "popping a cherry" the gynecologist licks his lips.

physical examination, virgins; the hymen, the mucous membrane covering the so-called, the cherry—it's called the cherry because it produces red fluid when it's busted—is intact. I have seen girls whose hymens were so small that I couldn't pass a finger through them. [*laughter*] In fact, I once saw a girl —I happen to be a gynecologist and get paid to do it. [*laugher and applause from boys*]..."' (82-3)

Upon the first joke, "With what your nose," the camera pans from the MS of gynecologist to the audience. It takes some time for the boys to settle down aurally, though visibly we only see subtle movements in the crowd and boys getting up to hand in their questions scrawled on paper. Their building excitement is fostered by the performance of the excitable gynecologist. He prepares to deliver the word "cherry" seemingly knowing that he is breaking from script, and pronouncing a colloquial word often not allowed in this space. As he delivers this word, "cherry" his expression shifts. He raises one eyebrow and twists his mouth with sly amusement. He pauses. As he delivers the next line, the tone of the gynecologist further shifts and he creates pauses between words for dramatic effect: "It's called the cherry because it produces red fluid when it's (pause) busted." He carefully articulates this word, 'busted,' accentuating the letter "b." This word, like "cherry," is another departure from his professional, dry script. After the cherry / busted build up, the boys have already begun to buzz. Buzzing continues as the gynecologist describes how he puts his fingers inside of a female patient to examine her.

Play clip of gynecologist's talk, noting the audio peaks and distortions.

Finally, upon the delivery of his punchline "I happen to be a gynecologist and get paid to do it," the room explodes with laughter and applause. The boys' raucous response is communicated to the viewer solely through the audio track. We cannot see the boys, as the camera stays on the gynecologist. But this outburst represents one of the loudest moments in the film. This requires that the doctor then deliver his next few lines over laughs and one-liners from the boys. He attempts to return the room to order by performing dry delivery of pre-scripted material. In fact, only when Wiseman cuts from the medium shot on the gynecologist to close up shots of the boys listening, does the room return to order. This moment, like Dr. Allen's sequences, masks a sound edit and the removal of time from the moment in situ.

Volume and gender are central in Wiseman's *Domestic Violence*. As I discussed earlier, Wiseman utilizes volume in ambient space to comment upon violence and recovery from violence. However, the volume of voice, particularly of the voices of those who have been abused, receives significant attention in the course of the film's narrative arc. During numerous sessions and in-take meetings, victims of domestic violence speak at length to their experiences. Often, as with most women traumatized by domestic violence, their speeches are delivered with suppressed emotion and numbness.[5] [open endnotes in new window]

They present flat, affectless descriptions of being pushed into walls, punched, controlled, intimidated, yelled at and raped. Counselors have space and time to tell the women about cycles of domestic violence—just as their silence was taught to them through intimidation, so must they learn to speak here at The Spring. And through these lessons, feeling returns to their voices. Near the end of the film, one woman exclaims: "We were talking about this this morning. (*yelling now*) We're allowed to use the tel-e-phone! We're allowed to talk!"

Domestic Violence audio clip: "We are allowed to talk." In Part 2, a woman finds her voice and regains vocal and aural freedom in the film. Listen for how the sound of the counselor is on-mic (suggesting a lavaliere) while she who speaks of the telephone includes more room in her voice and was likely recorded with a directional, shotgun mic.

Technically, Wiseman seems to employ two methods of sound recording in these group sessions. The recording of the women who have been abused and are residents at the shelter carries with it spatial signature, which suggests a boom mic or hand operated shotgun was used for audio pick up. At times, one recognizes a dip in volume as the microphone travels to the direction of a new speaker (moving from off to on-mic).

The audio clip of the whispered story, again. Listen here for how the voice increases in volume as the microphone finds her.

However, the recording of the counselor's voice who leads the discussion is on mic at all times and lacks spatial signature, suggesting that she was recorded with a lavaliere microphone or a planted directional microphone on a separate channel. Because of this difference in recording technique, the quality of her voice varies drastically from the quality of the voices of the other women in the room. Most strikingly, when she speaks, Wiseman does not cut to an image of her speaking. Rather we only hear her and see the women in the room listening to what she says. As evidenced by Sjogren, female voice is not always contained and controlled by the apparatus, particularly when it is disembodied voice off and/or voice-over (2006). In applying Sjogren to this observational documentary, the disembodied voice-off of the counselor, devoid of spatial signature, positions her as an authorial voice more closely aligned with the apparatus. Interestingly, this counselor is also a woman and her associations with the technology of documentary production, in this instance, does not connect her with a masculine space of domination. Rather, her voice, resounding with spacelessness and on-mic delivery, becomes the message that must be repeated so that others may heal and so that the experiences of these particular women, and other abused women, may be understood, thereby suggesting Wiseman's feminist apparatus.

Music masked as diegetic, dialogue rearranged and reconstructed, jump cuts supported by logical flows of words, and ambient sound emphasized and placed constitute manipulations common in the work of Wiseman and observational documentarians who study and work to emulate his techniques. Frederick Wiseman, considered by many as the mastercraftsman of observational cinema, openly acknowledges the manipulations inherent in this mode of documentary production. However, Winston notes that while claiming subjective construction, Wiseman speaks from both sides of his mouth, simultaneously arguing that he is editing with purpose, but insisting the viewer find meaning in the text for themselves. (2008, 163)

"The claim now was that it is the film-maker's subjectivity that

is being objectivity recorded. In this, though, direct cinema films remain evidence of something – the film-maker's 'witness'." (2008, 164)

For Winston, this denouncement of objectivity by the direct-cinema filmmaker, while simultaneously claiming the film reflects the filmmakers' point of view, is a "profound contradiction" that cannot undo the films' signing as objective, realistic, evidence. (163-165) Winston looks to a moment in the Maysles' *Primary* where synch was faked as a moment when audiences were made to consider the film as scientific evidence, not construction and mediation. (151)

In the tradition of direct-cinema that continues today, this moment and this technique, is indeed primary. Wiseman's films continue to rely on and benefit from the invisibility and malleability of the audio track. As such, sound editing provides the foundation in several documentary styles: be it voice-over narration enveloping and guiding an entire film, or the invisible sound edits in observational works linking sentences that never were, nor belonged, together. In practice, at the stage of post-production, documentary filmmakers employ transcribers to visualize the word. We highlight, cut and paste, rearrange these typed words into scintillating dialogue and cohesive interviews. Further, by arranging selections in music of the period and place, accentuating and arranging ambient tones, and adjusting and managing volume, the filmmaker, Wiseman, asserts his critique of a particular institution and recognition of social trauma. I do not condemn Wiseman and other documentary makers who have built upon his techniques for taking such liberties. In Bill Nichols' terms, these are storytellers "representing reality." Like Winston, I see that selection, arrangement and manipulation are a necessary part of the craft. He charges audiences to 'embrace an understanding of the inevitable mediations of the film-making process." (2008, 289) As filmmakers, we must also acknowledge how sound editing, and the manipulations therein, are central to the documentary process and look to Wiseman's sound editing practice as a guide that has influenced much of documentary production since the lessons we witnessed early on in *High School* and throughout his later films.

Go to Notes page

Notes

A version of this essay was first published in German in *Frederick Wiseman, Kino des Sozialen* (Ed. Eva Hohenberger, Vorwerk 8, 2009, pp. 139-155).

1.While foregrounding this method of documentary editing, Rabiger warns against relying on the written word entirely "I should warn that using transcripts too literally also has some dangers. It can lead you to place too much emphasis on words and thus to making a speech-driven film." (2004, 417) [return to page 1]

2. In *Invisible Storytellers*, Sara Kozloff deems observational documentary films engrossing and engaging because of the absence of voice-over narration. But she stipulates:

> "In film, then, while there are major differences between having the camera capture an action and having a narrator describe that action, the ideal of blissful communion between the viewer and some untouched, untainted reality presented by a completely neutral mechanism is an illusion." (14)

3. During a tour of the facility, the guide indicates that one in three American women is abused during a relationship, and that

> "the F.B.I., which is not a feminist organization, statistics suggest that it is more like one in two women will be physically abused."

[return to page 2]

4. As may be assumed, I rely on Laura Mulvey's discussion of the male gaze which derives pleasure from objectifying the female body, here.

5. Many studies of post traumatic stress disorder in chronically traumatized people, from victims of prolonged captivity to women effected by domestic violence, speak to the inhibition of emotion. I suggest these for brevity's sake: Herman 2004 and Elkin, Newman, Carter and Zaslav 1999. [return to page 3]

6. A documentary editor with whom I work calls this sound edit a "Franken-byte."

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Images from *Happy Mother's Day*

A throng of reporters greets Mrs. Fischer as she emerges from the hospital after giving birth to quintuplets. Initially upbeat, Mrs. Fischer soon lowers her gaze and refuses to engage with the crowd.

Consciousness-raising and difference in *The Woman's Film* (1971) and *Self-Health* (1974)

by Shilyh Warren

In the opening scene of Richard Leacock and Joyce Chopra's direct cinema classic, *Happy Mother's Day* (1963)*,* Mrs. Andrew Fischer emerges from the hospital while a sober male voice-off narrates the cause of her sudden fame: the mother of five has just given birth to quintuplets. Upon her exit from the hospital, Mrs. Fischer finds herself surrounded by a mob of male journalists. In the characteristic grainy, black and white footage of U.S. direct cinema or cinema vérité, Mrs. Fischer walks to her car and pauses to answer a few questions. The journalists crowd her, insinuating microphones and cameras at close proximity. Visible between two reporters in the foreground, Mrs. Fischer stands and smiles politely, but sighs heavily before uttering her first words in the film:

> "I don't have many feelings."

In response to her own profound statement, she laughs awkwardly and then a cameraman in the foreground suddenly shifts his equipment, blocking our view of Mrs. Fischer. As the film advances, it becomes increasingly clear that Mrs. Fischer is an implausible candidate for the hungry eyes and ears of the cameras and microphones that surround her. Finally, unable to maintain her composure in this first scene, Mrs. Fischer turns away from the mob after a few more questions, lowers her gaze and stops talking.
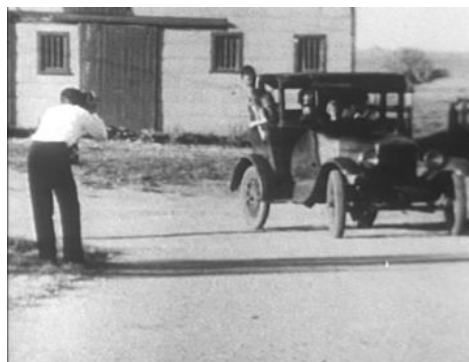
The other five Fischer children and their parents stage a ride in Dad's "only luxury," a Model T, for a photographer.

Mrs. Fischer flashes a rare smile while trying on a new dress at an upscale shop in town. The voice-over informs us that Mrs. Fischer hasn't had a store bought dress since her wedding day.

John Zimmerman, a photographer for *The Saturday Evening Post,* one of many media outlets who descend on Aberdeen, SD, to document the story of the Fischer quintuplets.

Gifts showered on the Fischers, which include 80 pairs of shoes and a year's supply of jarred baby food, are displayed on the lawn for Zimmerman's photo shoot.

Multiple interviews will follow in the film, each one more absurd than the others, as the Fischers become Aberdeen's greatest local attraction. Reporters from outlets such as the *Ladies Home Journal* and *The Saturday Evening Post* are pictured photographing the happy family in dad's "only luxury," The Model-T Ford, or out and about on the farm, or wading through the mountains of commodities donated to the family. Mrs. Fischer tries on an expensive store-bought dress and answers questions from the ladies' club representative about which colors she'd like them to use at the lunch that will be held in her honor. Throughout these scenes, Mrs. Fischer is often recalcitrant, slow to answer, and quite likely to respond with a shrug and an admission that she really doesn't care. It seems that as much as the local townsfolk and national media claim to want to celebrate the remarkable birth of her children, Mrs. Fischer is on to the media's ruse.

The new mother of quintuplets constantly refuses to meet the gaze of the camera and she rarely responds to the voice-off questions of the interviewer. In one of the few interview moments when she does respond, Mrs. Mary Ann Fisher is decidedly contrary. The interview follows a scene in which the remarkable numbers of goods

Mrs. Fischer adamantly tells filmmakers Richard Leacock and Joyce Chopra that her children will never be on display to outsiders.

donated to the family are displayed on a lawn for the purposes of a photograph. Automobiles, clothing, high chairs, gallons of milk, a mountain of jarred baby food, dishes, toys, and other gifts are splayed out for a photographer, who perches high atop a ladder in order to capture the shot. The ruse Mrs. Fischer seems to understand is evident in the juxtaposition of scenes in which the fetishization of the consumer goods parallels the commodification of the family itself. In the interview scene that follows, in which the couple self-reflexively consider their own fame, Mr. Fischer states his reluctant opinion that if tourists should come to the town to see the quintuplets, the visitors must be allowed in the Fischer's home. Mrs. Fischer disagrees, stating unequivocally,

"They're never going to be on display to anybody as far as I'm concerned."

In response to the voice of a female interviewer (likely Joyce Chopra), Mrs. Fischer declares, "To anybody," before she looks away, and then resumes defiantly, eyes still cast downward,

"As far as I'm concerned that's the way it better be."

As the central figure in *Happy Mother's Day,* Mrs. Fischer manifests a clever skepticism about the interest granted her by strangers. Her reluctance to be the star of both the film and the events in Aberdeen raises important questions about the relation between the filmed subject and the film that traffics in her image and her story.

Seeming to tire of the endless attention, Mrs. Fischer refuses to name her favorite colors to the chirpy organizer of a lunch banquet in her honor.

At a well-attended banquet, and with no trace of irony, the Mayor of Aberdeen declares the town's commitment to protect the privacy of the Fischer family.

Male leaders of Aberdeen meet to discuss ways that the town might benefit from public interest generated by the birth of the quints, including the sale of ...

... buttons and pins that read, "Quint City." "Quint City" hats for sale at the parade in honor of the quints' 1-month birthday.

Photographers and filmmakers surround the family to capture a series of staged shots before the parade.

The Fischers wave and smile during the parade. Mr. Fischer's easy manner contrasts with his wife's skeptical glances at the enthusiastic public.

Throughout the film the prematurely born quintuplets remain in the hospital; the film includes no images of the mother with her most famous offspring.

Images from *Joyce at 34*

Although the title of the film references a decidedly gendered affair, *Happy Mother's Day* is far from a feminist film. Demonstrated by the complicity with discourses of journalism consistently evoked in the figures of cameramen and reporters, the film self-consciously takes part in the hysterical reaction to Mrs. Fischer's reproductive capacities, which reduce the woman to the affairs of her uterus.[1] [open endnotes in new window] Mrs. Fischer's reluctance to engage with the media that court her suggests that she feels she is being treated not like a queen (as one Aberdeen woman suggests) but rather like a freak. We can only speculate, of course, since the other side of her reluctance means we are never granted access to Mrs. Fischer's feelings and thoughts about her dilemma. Mrs. Fischer, as she states so clearly in her opening lines, does "not have many feelings," at least not many that she is willing to share with the film crew.

Before feminist filmmakers appropriated and reformulated the codes and conventions of direct cinema, including hand-held cameras, location shooting, intimate interviews, and occasional voice-over, direct cinema had very little to say to or about women. As much as *Happy Mother's Day* makes possible a critical stance on the commodification of the Fischer family and implicates its own gaze in the media's exploitative impulses, the film cannot find its way into Mrs. Fischer's own version of her story. At no point do we hear about Mrs. Fischer's pregnancy, the birth of any of her ten children, her concerns about the impact the new infants will have on her life, her family, or her finances. Our knowledge about Mrs. Fischer is interrupted, fragmentary, and highly constructed around the narrative of her ascension to media stardom. The title of the film, *Happy Mother's Day,* comments ironically on what appears to be a very unhappy woman. Whether Mrs. Fischer was made suddenly morose by her new family configuration or is simply confounded by the relentless media attention, we never find out.

By the end of the decade, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the diverse coalitions of activists we refer to as the U.S. women's movement would popularize and politicize the practice of consciousness-raising, which urged women to develop epistemological and theoretical frameworks based on their own experiences rather than received (patriarchal, capitalist) modes of thinking and being. To reconsider *Happy Mother's Day* in what Linda Williams calls a "feminist hindsight" made possible by activism of the 1970s is to stage an alternative path into the feminist film archive of the 1970s.[2] Although women's documentaries were hotly contested within feminist film theory of the seventies because of their aesthetic and conceptual resemblance to direct cinema films, the example of *Happy Mother's Day* reminds us to consider an alternative relation at work between feminist documentaries and its vérité predecessors.

Women's vérités

Joyce Chopra's *Joyce at 34* (1972), for example, captures what Mrs. Fischer denied

having, that is, many feelings, particularly about motherhood. Chopra, who worked on several films with renowned documentary auteurs such as Leacock and Robert Gardner, made *Joyce at 34* in 1972 with Claudia Weill. Her first film, Chopra's *Joyce at 34* is a highly self-reflexive take on the process of constructing images and narratives about the figure of the mother.


As the camera pans from her head to her pregnant belly, Chopra says that she feels "angry" about "having, being biologically this way." Her voice-over confession desentimentalizes motherhood ...

... even as the picture offers a familiar, romanticized vision of the expectant mother. *Joyce at 34* includes a powerful birth scene in which the mother's labor is the raw material for the filmmaker's work.

A film about a filmmaker who is also a mother, *Joyce at 34* is about the labor of mothering and the work of filmmaking. Importantly, *Joyce at 34* is the first feminist documentary to explore the range of emotions, duties, and subjective acrobatics between personhood, motherhood, and labor that define motherhood for one individual *from her own perspective*. The film thus challenges the legacy of direct cinema in *Happy Mother's Day* on two counts. Formally it makes explicit the technologies of cinematic meaning making, questioning thus its own act of representation. And thematically it grants authority to the mother's own version of her story, insinuating thus a new politicized maternal figure into public visual discourse. In other words, the film explicitly converses with *and contests* its relation with direct cinema in ways that exceed its flattened designation as a derivative vérité film.[3] This holds true for many women's documentaries of the 1970s, including *The Woman's Film* (1971) and *Janie's Janie* (1972) which further demonstrate how women's documentary films often take up, resist, and transform direct cinema conventions in order to grant unprecedented authority and political legitimacy to women of color, working class women, and women fighting poverty.
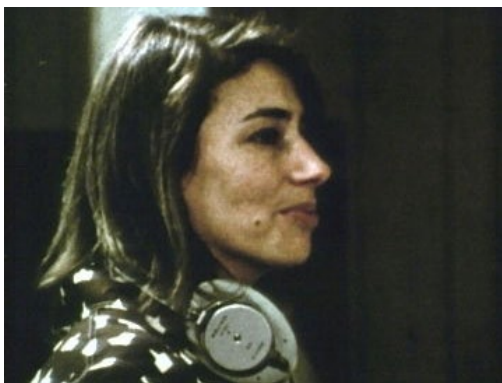
In her landmark 1978 article about women's documentaries, Julia Lesage countered anti-realist critiques about the political limitations of women's vérité films, arguing that feminist documentaries accomplished fundamental political interventions. Feminist documentaries, for example, re-envisioned the iconography of women, politicized domestic space, and created an audio-visual analogue to the practice of consciousness-raising. For Lesage, feminist documentaries accomplished political acts not in spite of the realist audio-visual aesthetics they deployed, but precisely because of them. In her 1975 review of Sheila Page's *Women's Happytime Commune*, E. Ann Kaplan's also forged a connection between feminist documentary and the political program of

Chopra's own mother plays a prominent role in the film, both as a site of maternal dis-identification for Chopra, and also as a working mother in her own right. In this lively scene, Chopra's mother and her friends recount, much in the same manner as 70s c-r sessions, the difficulties they endured as working mothers in the early 50s.

Chopra foregrounds her frustrated attempts to perform her professional work alongside the labor of mothering.

Sarah Rose Cole explores the editing table.

consciousness-raising. Like Kaplan's early work on 70s women's cinema, Lesage makes the realist aesthetics of feminist documentaries essential to their political relevance.[4] She writes,

> "Women's personal explorations establish a structure for social and psychological change and are filmed specifically to combat patriarchy. The filmmaker's and her subjects' intent is political" (509).

Placed within the context of a movement that sought to destroy patriarchy by convincing women that they needed feminism, bridging the personal and the political, and emphasizing commonalities amongst women as a political class, women's documentaries screen a particular notion of the political. The aesthetics of feminist documentaries, in Lesage and Kaplan's analyses, were most clearly legible within the discourse, rhetoric, and activism of the women's liberation movement. The films gained political purchase because they shared the political vision of a collective, radical movement, particularly, in Lesage's words, "the ethos" and goals of consciousness-raising (507). Lesage and Kaplan thus fasten the political impulses of feminist documentaries to their aesthetic conventions.

I agree with Lesage that the documentaries produced by feminist filmmakers sought relevance with movement politics. I also agree with Lesage that many feminist documentaries launch a return to the context of consciousness-raising—an arena of debate in feminist theory that went through a long silent period throughout the eighties but began receiving renewed attention in the mid-nineties, particularly amongst feminist literary critics. However, in this essay I supplement Lesage's landmark engagement with feminist documentary films of the 1970s, which insists on relations between form and politics, by paying close attention to the way each film constructs political subjectivity within and also beyond the frame. The documentaries I re-read in this essay, *Self-Health* (1974) and *The Woman's Film* (1971), stress identification, empathy, and authentic shared experience in conversation with the idealist rhetoric of various forms of 70s feminisms, including radical and socialist feminism, which emphasized the imbrications of class and gender. Shaped of course by my own feminist hindsight, this return to several landmark documentaries of the feminist seventies argues that the films continue to exert political and theoretical pressure to modes of thinking about feminist and cinematic constructions of political subjectivity.

Self-Health and *The Woman's Film,* for example, despite their common allegiance to a practice of consciousness-raising, apply pressure to different political visions, indeed political fantasies, and constitute distinct political subjects. *The Woman's Film* focuses on women of color and working class women and screens an imaginary of women's liberation as a coalition movement where the most oppressed members of society inhabit the center. Writing about the women in the film, one reviewer remarks,

> "They do not, in the wildest stretch of the imagination, fit anyone's image of militant supporters of Women's Liberation" (McKinney, 16A).

Whereas identification and experience in *The Woman's Film* do not depend therefore on identity and sameness, in *Self-Health* women's collective oppression and action is activated through a discourse of anatomical similarity. Read through the lens of consciousness-raising, *The Woman's Film* and *Self-Health* thus provide evidence of feminist political fantasies as well the limitations of the rhetoric and visual manifestations of female solidarity.

Consciousness-raising has constituted a problem for feminist theory in the wake of post-structuralism—one that is at once theoretical and practical as well as aesthetic. This is because consciousness-raising promulgates the centrality of

In the film's final sequence Chopra admits that she doesn't think she'll ever have a second child. "It would be the end," she laughs.

terms at odds with a poststructuralist, discursively-constituted and fragmented antihumanist subject: namely, experience and identity. If the renderings of political subjectivity in *Self-Health* and *The Woman's Film* pose problems thus for feminist and film theory, it is not simply or solely because they are presented in the language of realism, but rather because concepts such as action, agency, autonomy and experience have been characterized as incommensurate with a poststructuralist understanding of the subject. What I believe is called for here, echoing the concerns raised by Kathi Weeks and Sonia Kruks in their reformulations of feminist subjectivity, is a resistance to the either/or terms of the modernist/postmodernist debate in which we must choose either a humanist, Cartesian self-knowing subject *or* a displaced and discursively constituted notion of subjectivity.

Images from *The Woman's Film*

The Woman's Film, identification and difference

In an interview published in the inaugural issue of *Women & Film* in 1972, San Francisco Newsreel filmmaker, Judy Smith, describes the film she produced, directed, and edited with Louise Alaimo and Ellen Sorin, *The Woman's Film*. Asked about whether the filmmakers prioritized the aesthetic construction or the information at stake in *The Woman's Film*, Smith replies,

> "...this film came from the people. We when started out to make this film we decided that we weren't going to write the script, that the ideas would come from those women, that—like what Mao says, from the people to the people" (33).

A New-Left filmmaking and distribution collective, Newsreel was at the center of the political cinema scene in the United States in the late 1960s. Newsreel filmmakers generally claimed an anti-bourgeois notion of cinema, keen on shocking what they understood as bourgeois aesthetic sensibilities.[5] [open endnotes in new window] Films produced by the collective infamously share anti-conventions such as shaky camera work, blurred focus, erratic editing, and a lack of narrative cohesion. The first film made by an all-women crew in the filmmaking collective, *The Woman's Film* brings the tension between art and propaganda to the fore in the mind of the interviewer from *Women & Film*. But Smith's reply to the question of whether content or form guided the production of the film aims at a slightly different target, one perhaps just left of the art vs. propaganda mark. Smith, instead, explains the philosophy guiding the production of *The Woman's Film*. Quoting Mao, she points at once to the inspiration for the film, the reason for its form, and the purpose of its content: from the people, to the people.

Smith thus not only links the film to Marxism through the teachings of Mao; she also conjures the feminist practice of consciousness-raising—the hallmark political program of the women's liberation movement. A broad range of seventies feminists, including radical feminists, such as the New York Radical Women and Redstockings, held fast to the idea that women needed to completely rethink *thinking* as a way of getting closer to the truth of women's oppression. Likewise, The Combahee River Collective, for example, reference the significance of consciousness-raising in their "Statement," explaining how the process of "talking/testifying" generated new understandings among the women about "the implications of race and class as well as sex." Rather than understand women's oppression through theoretical models created by the class of oppressors, feminists sought to access an untainted mode of understanding their roles in society, their relationships to each other, and the multi-layered oppressions that many women faced.[6] Women, in other words, although they comprehended their oppressors and the forms of oppression they faced distinctly, depending on their race, class, ethnicity, and sexuality, wanted a mode of thinking that resonated with the particular experiences of being women in the world. British feminist Sheila Rowbotham stated the case unambiguously in *Woman's Consciousness, Man's World*:

> "the language of theory—removed language—only expresses a reality experienced by the oppressors. It speaks only for their world, from their point of view. Ultimately a revolutionary movement has to break the

These shots from the opening sequence juxtapose images of women laboring – sweeping, changing diapers, emptying ashtrays – with mass media images of idealized womanhood.

hold of the dominant group over theory, it has to structure its own connections" (33).

Rowbotham echoes the sentiments of many women's liberation activists and thinkers who saw the program of consciousness-raising as a method of analysis and discovery designed to create more relevant and revolutionary modes of thinking. Women who claimed the revolutionary right to practice consciousness-raising also reached back to a lineage that included the Chinese revolutionary slogan "to speak pains to recall pains" and the rhetoric of Guatemalan revolutionaries—hence women's liberation's most memorable slogan, "the personal is political." Consciousness-raising, in other words, signaled the emergence of revolution—the coming together of a newly defined people, in this case women, in an effort to name their oppression, connect through shared experience, and strategize a collective liberation.[7]

One of the earliest feminist documentaries, *The Woman's Film* explicitly demonstrates the trajectory of consciousness-raising, which takes the five women featured in the film from personal lament, through shared experience, to political action in organizations dedicated to the eradication of gendered, racial, and class-based oppression. *The Woman's Film* reveals the ways that these early films depended on identification and served as audio-visual analogs to the practice of consciousness-raising. The women featured in the film move from describing their problems and narrating shared experiences to taking part in political action. Diverse women are framed similarly from the chest up in traditional talking-head poses as they contrast the lives they expected to live as grown women with the constrained lives they ended up with. Each woman is often isolated from other influences and centered in the frame, commanding the full attention of the spectator. There are no psychologists, social workers, or feminist spokeswomen interpreting the narratives of these poor and working class women. Granted full command of the time and space of the frame, each woman is validated as the expert of her own experience, witness to her own transformation, and evidence for women beyond the frame of a newly possible subject of feminist politics.

Often when I screen this film for my students or my university colleagues, audience members bemoan what they read as unnecessary repetition throughout the film. However, repetition, accumulation, and accretion are key strategies the film deploys throughout to construct a collective awareness and a persuasive argument about the systemic operations of patriarchy and capitalism. The forty-five minute film opens with a series of still and moving images, a staccato montage that juxtaposes photographs of diverse women washing linens, dishes, and floors, with mass media representations of idealized brides and beauty queens. The pop music hit, "I can't get no satisfaction," provides the rhythm for the opening montage, which sets forth the contraction at the heart of the women's liberation movement and explored throughout the film—that is, the clash between received notions of "womanhood" and the real-life experiences of poor and working-class U.S. women. Later in the film another montage adds layers of meaning to the women's voices, repeating the film's overall message that collective oppression demands a collective solution. In one telling sequence, a close-up still image of a woman's head thrown back, mouth howling explodes into a grid that repeats the image column after column, row after row.

Similarly, the film's accumulated interviews enact equality and justice formally at the same time as a repetitive rhetoric of shared experiences surfaces in the soundscape. Although the women interviewed are racially, ethnically, and economically diverse, they tell remarkably similar stories about disillusionment and entrapment. They struggle to find existential and material fulfillment under severe constraints, limited variably by controlling husbands, demanding children, exploitative bosses, or state bureaucrats. Across scenes in which women of different classes, races, and activist allegiances collectively analyze their material and political conditions, the mode of production insists on audio-visual equality to make a case about women's collective oppression. In these scenes where women speak both to each other and to the camera, they arrive in aggregation at the realization that their/your oppression is systematic rather than individual. "The only way things are going to be livable is for a complete change over to be made," explains one young mother. "Change has to come through changing minds," concurs another. Women's voices echo and reverberate with passion. Through the sheer force of repetition, the voices create a chorus, a consensus, and a collective body.

In the final sequence of the film, the diverse women featured throughout appear as leaders at rallies and demonstrations, galvanizing other women to resist and revolt. No longer framed in formal interviews, the women have emerged as public speakers. They yell, scream, and chant. As the accompanying musical track makes clear with the refrain, "I woke up this morning…," by sharing their experiences and uniting their energies, the film suggests, women have finally woken up to the truth of their oppression. Significantly, *The Woman's Film* also aspires to instigate this realization in spectators—the realization that feminism is possible here and now — perhaps even necessary—for me, too.

The audiences of women's documentaries were conceived of as fluid sites of potential transformation and becoming. Although realism and identification came under severe scrutiny in a dominant strain of film studies in the mid to late 1970s, these films demonstrate that "realism" might also be a misleading term for an unruly assortment of aesthetic practices, and, as Alexandra Juhasz has argued, that identification can operate in a number of politically astute ways. In these films, for instance, identification with the faces, voices, and experiences of talking heads was crucial to the political demands of the moment: collective resistance and revolution against a culture that had silenced and suppressed the experiences and desires of women. Real women telling their own stories, in the supportive company of other women—both on and off screen—created a unique opportunity for political engagement and action.

A wide range of screenings and extensive media coverage suggest that Newsreel hit home with their first film by, for, and about women. In a review entitled, "'Woman's Film'": A Look at Poverty," The *San Francisco Chronicle* announced on February 26, 1971,

> "Women's liberation now has its own full-length film, with more good humor than anger" (20).

The Woman's Film enjoyed successful runs in New York and California theatres. Newsreel filmmakers also screened the film to diverse audiences, ranging from movement meetings and university screenings to a room of male telephone company employees.[8] In April 1971, the film reached the museum circuit with a screening at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City as part of series programmed by John Hanhardt entitled, "What's Happening."[9] Positive reviews of the film erupted in print media from Berkeley to New York.[10]

The Woman's Film mobilizes the two key concepts at work in consciousness-raising: experience and identification. Conceived as a site of pure authenticity,

Across scenes in which women of different classes, races, and activist allegiances collectively analyze their material and political conditions, the mode of production insists on audio-visual equality to make a case about women's collective oppression. The women featured in the documentary are framed similarly in from the shoulders up as they describe their coming to feminist consciousness.

experience granted women in consciousness-raising groups a newfound authority. The Redstockings Manifesto expresses the vision in these terms:

> "We regard our personal experience, and our feelings about that experience, as the basis for an analysis of our common situation. We cannot rely on existing ideologies as they are all products of male supremacy culture. We question every generalization and accept none that are not confirmed by our experience" (113).

As visualized in the film, each woman was the expert of her own being in the world, the author of her story about living in it, and the executor of her narrative describing that experience. By granting women the authority to generate alternative epistemologies through personal experience, Redstockings' notion of consciousness-raising aspires to a radical reconfiguration of both collective identification and collective knowledge: women as a class allegedly shared a unique perspective on the world, hitherto unrevealed and hence a potential site of tremendous political power.

Further, experience constituted a vehicle for identification between and among women. The rhetoric of the Redstockings' Manifesto fantasizes about a mode of identification that could bridge women *in spite of* their differences; gender, in other words, above all, defined women's being in the world in the political vision of the radical feminists. "We identify with all women," declares the 1969 Redstockings Manifesto,

> "We define our best interest as that of the poorest, most brutally exploited woman. We repudiate all economic, racial, educational or status privileges that divide us from other women. We are determined to recognize and eliminate any prejudices we may hold against other women" (113).

In this fantasy of female solidarity, identification hinges not on identity between women, but on the identical recognition that gender is *the* defining feature of all women's lives.

Feminist activists and scholars have robustly critiqued this fantasy of gender solidarity virtually since the moment it emerged. Many have valuably questioned the assumptions at play in this version of "identification not identity" that arguably suppresses, excludes, or ignores "differences" in a universalistic narrative that actually only applies to the perspective of white, middle-class women. The Combahee River Collective Statement for example makes plain that Black women's experience of feminism and consciousness-raising requires them to go "beyond white women's revelations" about oppression. They write,

> "The major source of difficulty in our political work is that we are not just trying to fight oppression on one front or even two, but instead to address a whole range of oppressions. We do not have racial, sexual, heterosexual, or class privilege to rely upon, nor do we have even the minimal access to resources and power that groups who possess anyone of these types of privilege have."

What is important is to understand how *The Woman's Film* builds a fantastical

As the film advances, many of the interviewed women appear as public speakers and leaders at demonstrations and rallies.

vision of feminism as a coalition movement that prioritizes the struggles of women of color and poor and working class women, and how it projects the lived possibility of a feminist fantasy where difference matters. Through its audio-visual commitment to consciousness-raising, the film mobilizes identification, but it does not build its alternative political imaginary around a homogenous category of woman. Rather, the film channels its commitment to justice and equality through its realist codes and conventions. By framing diverse individual women and groups of activist women with consistently applied time and space constraints, notions such as authority, experience and expertise are dispersed, decentered, and defamiliarized. Experience belongs to each and every woman diversely and uniquely, while at the same time identification with the accumulated recorded narratives and images allows viewers to locate themselves within the new world of justice constructed by the film. *The Woman's Film* puts realist aesthetics to work at the service of a vision of feminist politics that prioritizes not only gender but also race and class.

A close-up still image of a woman's head thrown back, mouth howling explodes into a grid that repeats the image column after column, row after row. The film consistently stresses the power and necessity of the transition from thinking about individual malaise to systemic oppression.

Following the ideal trajectory of consciousness-raising, the film's final sequences feature women rising up collectively.

Identification was critical to this aspiration. The filmmakers hoped that women viewers would "identify with the experiences and feelings of the women in the film" and embrace the idea that "women are strong when united, and when they work together and support each other, they have the power to bring about meaningful and necessary changes in this country" ("The Woman's Film" Notes). The film both demonstrates and executes the possibility of a new, albeit fantastical, feminist

becoming. By following the progressive trajectory from the personal to the political among a group of diverse women, *The Woman's Film* stresses the power of identification and empathy and the action these have the potential to ignite.

Similarly, in *Janie's Janie* (1970), a landmark Newsreel release directed by Geri Ashur with a New York-based crew including Peter Barton, Marilyn Mulford and Stephanie Pawleski, identification operates precisely within a framework of difference signaled by the Redstockings Manifesto. *Janie's Janie* features the story of a white, single, welfare mother of five in Newark, NJ. The film's narrative is motivated by Janie's journey to independence, her transformation from her father's Janie to her husband's Janie to the final realization: Janie's Janie. Unlike *The Woman's Film,* which intercuts archival images of women to establish a historical framework for women's oppression, *Janie's Janie* visually takes place entirely in the context of the present. Whereas *The Woman's Film* downplays a biographical imperative by featuring a myriad of women and a chorus of reflections on women's oppression, *Janie's Janie* maintains an interest in Janie as an exemplary figure for women's liberation. Despite these differences, both *Janie's*

Janie's Janie begins on the outside of Janie's intimate life, following her towards the heart of her story: her domestic life inside the home.

Janie and *The Woman's Film* evidence an aesthetic commitment to projecting a consciousness-raising conversion narrative, as well as the impulse to cast a multiply oppressed figure at the center of women's liberation. At a time when the mainstream press sought the least threatening spokeswoman for the movement in Kate Millett, featured on the cover of *Time* magazine in 1970, the women of Newsreel shared the opinion that "women's lib" was about identifying with the most disenfranchised among them. Structured around the trajectory from the personal to the political implied by consciousness-raising, *Janie's Janie* encourages women to see their own oppression mirrored in the narratives of all women despite the obvious differences in their material lives—to identify, as the Redstockings manifesto suggests, with "the poorest, most brutally exploited woman."

In the opening shot of *Janie's Janie,* a woman's figure in the center of the frame walks away from the camera, towards the front door of a modest row house. Children rush out to meet her and assist her with the grocery bags she carries home. *Janie's Janie* thus begins on the outside of Janie's intimate life, following her as it were towards the heart of her story: her domestic life inside the home.


The first part of the film takes place within Janie's home, where she answers questions from the film crew, often as she goes about quotidian activities, such as cooking and dressing her children.

Jane Giese passionately recounts her former lives as her father's Janie and then her husband's Janie, clearly at ease with the filmmakers who interview her.

Inside her house, Janie continues with the motions of her life even as she answers delicate questions about her abusive father and controlling husband. She dresses the children, prepares a chicken for the oven, and folds laundry all the while smoking cigarettes and constructing the narrative of her raised consciousness. The film stitches together excerpts from several different interviews to create the trajectory that would lead Janie through her young life under her father's strict rule to her dashed hopes of salvation through marriage, to her final realization that solidarity among women is the only answer that will lead to structural change for the working poor.
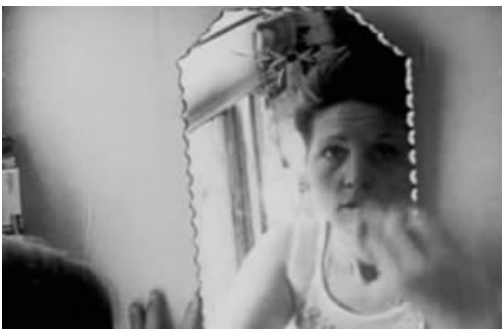
In this symbolic shot, Janie's image appears as a reflection in the looking glass. At stake in the film is Janie's ability to recognize herself as an autonomous person and a vital member of her working class community.

Visually the film eschews visual continuity for the sake of maintaining the consciousness-raising trajectory from the personal to the political. Janie narrates the sense of loneliness and isolation that plagued her before she linked up with the welfare rights activists in her community. Once she understands that women throughout her neighborhood share her struggles, the path towards action is obvious. At this point in her narrative, the film shifts from the domestic sphere, to the public sphere. As Janie speaks non-synchronously in a voice-over, shots of Janie show her outside her home where her political awakening has lead her: at the neighborhood child care center her group founded to provide free child care to working women and at the organization office where she consults with colleagues. In the film's final shot, Janie walks toward the camera with a colleague, her body in motion in public. Janie heads past the camera into the distance, a new, public and collective horizon before her.

In the film's final sequences, Janie appears in the public realm, at the childcare center she helps run and at meetings with other women. By the end of the film, Janie is a self-defined woman ...

... who nonetheless works collectively with other women. Whereas the opening shot moves into the private sphere, the closing shot frames Janie out on an urban street in the company of other women.

Self-Health, experience and sameness

Images from *Self-Health*

The opening shots of *Self-Health* locate women's collective identity in the details of their anatomical identity.

The use of close-ups strategically draws our attention to a newly defined corporeal landscape.

Despite an espoused insistence on concentrating on the most oppressed, however, the feminist fantasy of solidarity that consciousness-raising was meant to catalyze often lent itself to repressing difference. A powerful fantasy throughout seventies movement rhetoric, literature and film, consciousness-raising became equally problematic for the movement and for theory. According to Carla Kaplan, consciousness-raising was a project of significant albeit unrealized potential:

> "[U]ltimately, it was neither challenging nor as provocative as it might have been. Consciousness-raising often failed to reach a truly heterogeneous group of women or even to appreciate the heterogeneity of its own potential practitioners. Many women left consciousness-raising groups disappointed at not being heard and fed up with the subtle pressures to conform to particular viewpoints or to avoid taboo subjects, especially about race and class, about feelings of hostility toward other women and feelings of desire for them." (155)

Kaplan spells out the intrinsic problems that were built into consciousness-raising's concept, practice, and theory. Based on similarity, consciousness-raising suppressed the significance of difference. Based on sisterhood, it made claims about womanhood that were soon critiqued as essentialist and exclusionary. Although the slogan for radical feminism insisted that "we are one, we are woman" (Echols 203), the fact was that this rhetoric of sisterhood, as soon as it was uttered, came under assault in the movement from working-class women, lesbians, and women of color.

The way that a pioneering film like *Self-Health,* for example, screens consciousness-raising into the fabric of a radical film about women reclaiming their bodies from the male-dominated medical-industrial complex locates sameness in the bodies of women who are all white. In *Self-Health*, by filmmakers Catherine Allan, Judy Irola, Allie Light, and Joan Musante, produced with the San Francisco Women's Health Center, viewers take part in three group sessions for women. In the first, women are guided through a pelvic self-examination; in the second, women learn how to perform breast self-exams; and in the third women learn to perform bi-manual exams on other women. The women participants are gathered in the intimate spaces of the domestic sphere. In the manner of consciousness-raising sessions, the women form a circle with their bodies, which are casually propped against pillows on the floor. The camera replicates the egalitarian ethics of the consciousness-raising session by granting equivalent screen time to each participant, following the individuals around the circle as they engage in a discussion about their experiences with medical professionals and coming to terms with masturbation, menstruation, and sexuality.

Self-Health opens with a manifesto. Over soft, precise close-ups of the

Eye-level camera angles situate the viewer within the world of the self-health session; the film invites you to be a participant rather than a voyeur.

One of the session leaders invites the participating women to observe her cervix.

Long shots from a high angle capture groups of women as they collectively explore their bodies.

most general anatomical details of female intimacy—nipples, lips, arm pits, and pubic hair—a voice calls forth a new feminist subject: a subject defined by a dialectical relation between the individual and the collective; the female body mediates the exchange. In voice-off, a woman declares,

> "We're learning from our own bodies; teaching ourselves and each other how each of us is unique and the same, and what we need in order to be healthy."

According to the visuals, what women share exists in the details of their bodies. By reclaiming this "lost territory, which traditionally belonged to our doctors, our husbands, to everyone but us," the film suggests that women can lay claim to a veritable sisterhood. As the title appears during a long take that begins at a woman's face and ends on her pubic mound, mapping "the lost territory" at stake, the voice-off proclaims, "and now it's time to get it back." By framing the women who speak in eye-level medium shots, the camera situates the spectator within the circle of women. The seamless editing between shots of women speaking replicates motions that might be natural for a person sitting among the women in the circle. Intimately situated within the most private kind of conversation, the spectator is not at all a voyeur, slyly perceiving but unperceived. Rather, the spectator becomes a participant of the group session. *Self-Health* thus reconfigures the cinematic representation of women's bodies, recuperating them from the medical as well as the cinematic gaze and claiming them *for* women and *for* a presumably female audience.[11] [open endnotes in new window]

Once the film pursues the documentation of the three main workshops, the camera techniques focus on synching image to sound. The result is a film that evidences a commitment to message and content: women have historically been alienated from their own bodies by a male-dominated medical establishment; the film is one attempt to regain connections and territory. Provided with speculums, mirrors, and flashlights, women need first of all to assume a responsibility for *knowing* their own bodies—for recognizing the shape, feel, and characteristics of their cervixes, uteruses, and breasts. By extension women will have gained a power to control their health, reproduction, and holistic sense of self where the outside is coterminous with the inside of the body.

The film's aesthetics focus on a linear trajectory, which begins with alienation and the sense that women individually experience this estrangement from the medical establishment. Then, through sharing their experiences, women realize that alienation is rather a collective experience. In voice-off, which accompanies a long-shot of three women lounging on a sheet examining their cervixes, a woman explains:

> "A lot of us have felt the same fears and doubts and we always felt that we experienced them as individuals. And when we're in a group we realize that many of us have felt the same things; there are fears and doubts that we share together and that we can explore together."

A close-up of her cervix is also an eye-line match to the women's collective gaze. In this way, we see what they see.

In the bi-manual exam session, the volunteer, Christy, is consistently framed in medium and close-up shots that include her face.

The film thus balances its emphasis between her experience of the bi-manual exam and the reactions of the other women who learn to perform the exam on her. She is decidedly not merely the object of the lesson, but rather its central subject.

Visually, the women in the film literally shed their outer layers as they collectively investigate their own and each other's bodies. The journey takes these women to the interior of their bodies, where their commonality is revealed and then, literally, felt. In a third workshop, the facilitator guides the participant women through the mechanics of a bi-manual pelvic exam. Equal screen time is granted to the woman performing the exam and the woman, Christy, who is being examined. Christy is encouraged to feel for her uterus before the other women in the room are invited to experiment. Throughout the room, where women stand observing and participating in the lesson, comments of surprise abound: "It's so small!"; "It's amazing!" The intimacy—and intimate touching—among the women creates the possibility for connection, and ultimately action. Because the filmic techniques stress intimacy and egalitarianism with eye-level shots and medium shots that generally include a woman's face with her genitals, the viewer metonymically takes part in the shared experience generated on screen. The key to the film lies in the strategies of identification—with the camera and with the women on screen: cervix to cervix, as it were. Interpreting *Self-Health*'s so-called naïve realism in terms of consciousness-raising we get closer not necessarily to the truth of the movement or of the film itself but rather to the truth of the interrelated fantasies of both the movement and the film. We can also see how the films develop alternative ways of thinking about identification. Whereas *The Woman's Film* and *Janie's Janie* (1971) illustrate a commitment to maintain a disjuncture between identification and identity, *Self-Health* slides into the discursive space where identification and identity become one.

Before film theorists in the 1970s linked identification to a mode by which dominant ideology infiltrated narrative cinema, Frantz Fanon used the term to describe post-colonial subjects' culturally-situated viewing experiences. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon gives the following example in a footnote:

> "Attend showings of a Tarzan film in the Antilles and in Europe. In the Antilles, the young negro identifies himself de facto with Tarzan against the Negroes. This is much more difficult for him in a European theatre, for the rest of the audience, which is white, automatically identifies him with the savages on the screen." (Fanon 152-53)

Fanon's point is that cultural context defines the processes of identification for the post-colonial subject. Thus in Fanon's conception, identification resists stasis and fixity; rather as a psychic process of recognition, identification depends critically on context. Fanon's insistence on recognition not only with the characters on screen but *via* the other spectators in the room sheds light on the radical feminist understanding of the role of identification in the process of consciousness-raising. For radical feminists, recognition with other women happened not only as a result of the content of the shared narratives of experience, but within the community of listeners. To identify with women in a consciousness-raising session meant to collectively imagine a political subjectivity for the future, not necessarily to feel confident about the fixed identity of the present. In this way, identification served a forward-reaching goal rather than sedimenting a prior or fully constituted subjectivity.

The disjunction between a feminist understanding of identification and the concept as it circulated in psychoanalytically-determined feminist film

This close-up of a plastic speculum importantly also includes a woman's face in the background. The professional instrument is thus reclaimed by its object of analysis whose own hands now determine its purpose.

theory should come as no surprise. As Stuart Hall remarks,

> "Identification turns out to be one of the least well-understood concepts ... It is drawing meanings from both the discursive and the psychoanalytic repertoire, without being limited to either" (2).

In my reading, feminists saw identification through the process of consciousness-raising as the means of calling into being a new feminist subject in solidarity. This is not to say that the effort would ever be either successful or complete. Hall maintains that the fictions motivated by the efforts of belonging—in this case, the fantasy of sisterhood imagined in the process of consciousness-raising—are effectively constitutive of identities despite the "fictional nature of this process" (4). Feminist documentaries such as *Self-Health* and *The Woman's Film,* by both performing and constructing consciousness-raising for and among feminist viewers, contributed to the constitution of an idealized and fantasized feminist solidarity. And yet, it is important to reiterate here that they demonstrate varied and telling understandings of the relationship between identification and identity.

In seventies continental film theory, identification signaled the adverse practices of dominant cinema, which disarmed spectator-subjects of their analytical faculties and lulled them into passive receptacles for the ideology projected from the normative narratives on screen. At best, the film-as-text might evidence enunciative fissures in its ideological cohesion, creating exploitable crises for a resistant spectator. In contrast, for many feminist documentary filmmakers of the early 1970s the notion of identification implied a material, counter-hegemonic practice if it also supported a notion of subjectivity that assumed each subject contained within an authentic core that could be grasped and altered in full. Imbued with utopian potentiality, identification was assumed to be capable of generating a sisterhood among a viable group, "women," previously distracted from their gender solidarity by the supposedly false divisions that kept them isolated from each other: domestic heterosexuality, class, race.

As I've argued, the fantasy of sisterhood, given flesh in the practices of the real, manifests itself in *Self-Health* as a function of identification as identity. Another way to say this would be to point out that *Self-Health* problematically mobilizes an "essentialist" visual and rhetorical construction of the category of women.

As Nöel Sturgeon lays out this contradiction in *Ecofeminist Natures,* feminist activism and feminist theory are often divided along the lines of essentialism. Feminist activism is usually implicated in problematic structures of essentialism while feminist theory is credited with a more enlightened anti-essentialism. Sturgeon writes,

> "the political implications of essentialist constructs of women or of race are some of the central problems of contemporary feminist theory" (6).

Sturgeon's work on ecofeminism complicates what she sees as a "stalemate" between tropes of essentialism and anti-essentialism within contemporary feminism by paying close attention to movement politics and working in two directions: theorizing activist practice and seeing theory in that practice (11). It is helpful here to keep in mind the specificity

and context within which Sturgeon analyses both the critique of essentialism and the mobilization of the category of women for feminist activism. As my analysis of *The Woman's Film* bears out, movement-based calls for gender solidarity need not necessarily elide and suppress race and class differences. However, *Self-Health* exemplifies the ways that the fantasy of feminist sisterhood and the structures of identification mobilized by the rhetoric, practice, and visual representation of consciousness-raising could easily support the marginalization of difference, particularly when the notion of woman at stake is located in the anatomical similarities of the female body.[12] By constructing sameness through anatomy, and constituting identification through identity, *Self-Health* indeed provides evidence for the anti-essentialist critique of feminism.[13]

To reconsider feminist films of the 1970s with feminist hindsight is a task that mobilizes a host of aesthetic, political, and affective debates about the now-mythical "Seventies" as well as our contemporary moment. While I clearly desire to recuperate many of these films and make claims about their contemporary relevance, I hesitate to make a case based on terms as over-generalized as "the women's liberation movement," "realism," "activism," or even, "consciousness raising." For, if the seventies are critiqued variously as essentialist albeit politicized, committed albeit naïve, and embedded in movement politics that were nonetheless misguided, I believe the contemporary critic's task must be to insist on particularization rather than continued overgeneralization. Each film tells its own stories – stories about its political commitments, political fantasies, ideological revolutions *and* indeed, ideological shortcomings. In my discussions of *The Woman's Film* and *Self-Health,* I have argued that as a critical point of reference, the rhetoric of consciousness-raising draws us into both the fantasies and the very real limitations of some feminist calls for female solidarity. Rather than insist upon the "real" versus the "contingent," my appeal to recognize seventies feminist rhetoric as aspirational rather than evidentiary seeks to resist idealizing, romanticizing, or homogenizing both feminist cultural and theoretical production and the fragmented coalition movement politics from which they emerged.

Notes

1. Although the television network ABC commissioned the film, the broadcast producers were dissatisfied with Leacock and Chopra's version of the story of the media "hoopla" over the quintuplets. They never aired *Happy Mother's Day* but instead produced an alternative version called *Quint City*. According to Leacock, the ABC version was "toned down" and *Happy Mother's Day* was a "political film" (Naficy 201). In a 1982 interview with Hamid Naficy, Leacock explains his sense of what makes *Happy Mother's Day* political in these terms: "If you analyze it, if you discuss that film, whole aspects of our society will be revealed by it" (200). In the interview, Leacock expresses discomfort with the word "political" though he uses it quite a few times. At one point he says, "'Political' is such a bad word, like 'propaganda'" (201). [return to page 1]

2. In "Feminist Film Theory: *Mildred Pierce and the Second World War,"* Williams argues that readings of Curtiz's 1945 film, especially by feminist scholars "in the context of current feminist enlightenment" tend to neglect a nuanced consideration of female spectators of the 1940s. Feminist hindsight, in other words, encourages readings of the film that prioritize gendered analysis, but for Williams, these readings fall short by emphasizing "either the repression or the reflection of woman." Williams also glosses a familiar history of 1970s feminist film theory, which she cleaves into dueling camps: psychoanalytic and semiologically oriented feminists on one side (repression) and sociologists and historians (reflection) on the other. The stories feminist scholars tell about the historiography of feminist film theory is a matter I and others take up elsewhere (see Warren).

3. See, for example, Kaplan's *Women & Film,* where the author argues that *Joyce at 34* exemplifies the dominant trend of women's filmmaking in the 1970s, what she calls documentary in the "verité style" and opposed to "avant-garde theory" films, such as Mulvey and Wollen's *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1976) (125).

4. In "*Women's Happytime Commune*: New Departures in Women's Films," Kaplan thoughtfully considers legitimate reasons for the vérité approach. In the later publication of her book *Women & Film*, Kaplan noticeably omits this analysis in favor of the rising trend of what Williams' would call the psychoanalytic semiological approach.

5. Newsreel articulated their project this way: "Films made by Newsreel are not to be seen once and forgotten. Once a print goes out, it becomes a tool to be used by others in their own work ... We intend to cover demonstrations; to

interview figures like LeRoi Jones and Garrison; we want to show what is at stake in a housing eviction or in consumer abuses in Harlem; we should provide information on how to deal with police or on the geography of Chicago" (Rabinowitz 87). []

6. Kathie Sarachild explains, "The idea was to take our own feelings and experience more seriously than any theories which did not satisfactorily clarify them, and to devise new theories which did reflect the actual experience and feelings and necessities of women" ("CR as Radical Weapon" 135).

7. In *Woman's Consciousness, Man's World,* Rowbotham stresses revolutionary potential of changed consciousness, which comes about only through great effort. She writes, "All revolutionary movements create their own ways of seeing. But this is a result of great labour. People who are without names, who do not know themselves, who have no culture, experience a kind of paralysis of consciousness. The first step is to connect and learn to trust one another" (27).

8, For example, a Newsreel press release advertises screenings in February 1971 at American Zoetrope, Surf Interplayers, and the University of California, Berkeley (MOMA Archives).

9. MOMA press release draft (MOMA Archives). Sharon Smith describes the screening to telephone company employees in the *Women & Film* interview (31).

10. Press reviews of the film include: Joan McKinney, "The 'Quiet Women' Speak Out," *Oakland Tribune*; Beverly Koch, "Liberated women Take Up the Arts," *San Francisco Chronicle*; Jonas Mekas, "Movie Journal," *Village Voice;* Molly Haskell, "Women Without Men," *Village Voice;* "Femmes Fatales," *Women's Wear Daily;* Irwin Silber, "The Woman's Film," *Guardian.*

11. Eithne Johnson theorizes what she calls "the specular scene" in *Self-Health* in "Loving Yourself: The Specular Scene in Sexual Self-Help Advice for Women." []

12. *Self-Health* thus shares some of the limitations of the women's health movement from which it emerges. Sandra Morgen's *Into Our Own Hands* and Jennifer Nelson's *Women of Color and the Reproductive Rights Movement* provide excellent analyses of women's health activism of the 1970s. Both authors detail the critiques of the self-health movement in particular, which emphasized cervical self-examination as visualized in the film. Further, both authors stress the critique levied at mostly white women health activists for de-emphasizing the way health is always imbricated with race, class, and culture. Thus, the critique of the women's health movement echoes the critique of seventies feminism more generally.

13. Landmark examples of feminist anti-essentialist critique include: Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence"; Angela Davis, "Racism, Birth Control, and Reproductive Rights"; Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master's House"; *This Bridge Called*

My Back; The "Combahee River Collective Statement"; *Conditions Five: The Black Woman's Issue;* and *The Black Woman: An Anthology.*

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On suffering and human eloquence: commemorating 9/11, televised U.S. coverage in 2011

by Isabel Pinedo

A visual essay

Out of the blue, the first attacks on the World Trade Center unfolded against a clear, crisp blue September sky, a clash of contrasts that embodied the sense of strangeness that marked that day.


The attack was designed to be telegenic, marked by visual and sonic spectacle. Yet much of the horror unfolded off-screen: inside the planes and buildings, on the ground immediately below the towers, and in desperate phone calls to loved ones and 911 operators. (Photograph *20/20*)

The realization in retrospect, that many of the horror-stricken expressions of onlookers during the catastrophe coverage were due to watching people fall to their deaths, refreshes the horror years later. (Photograph Patrick Witty)

Horror requires spectacle, suspense, and narrative. Clearer, closer shots of the raging fire, stoked by fuel, wind, and its own momentum ...
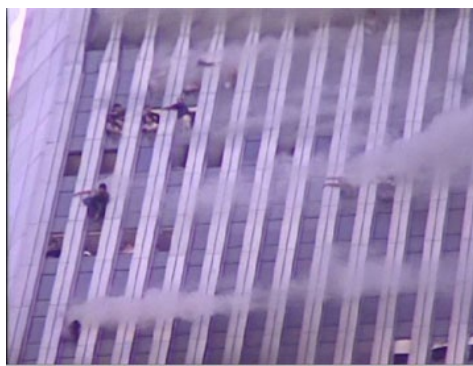
... add to the sense of sheer terror that drove people onto and out of the windows.
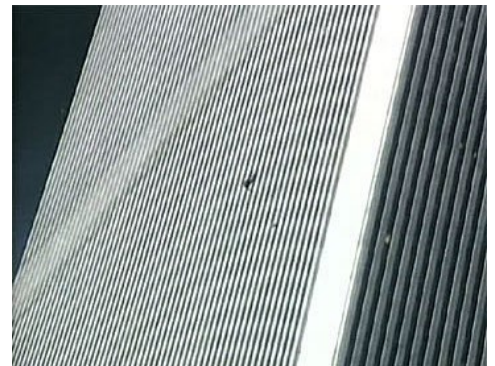
Induced by the ferocious heat, the encroaching flames, and the suffocating smoke to pull away, they clung to windows, they called for help, they fainted, they fell, they leapt. Who can say? From all sides of the North Tower, for over 90 minutes.

Bystanders watched the only visible evidence of ongoing death. Television cameras largely looked away, but captured reaction shots in their stead.

The evocative power of the human face and gesture elicits sympathy and a contagion effect. Witnesses serve as audience surrogates. The viewer experiences the event through their gestures, their expressions, their bodies. (Photograph *20/20*)

Reaction shots invite the viewer to become emotionally involved in the scene.

On the ground, first responders were warned to look out for falling bodies, to avoid being struck by them. As they mobilized at the foot of the towers, they gazed up, riveted by the sight and thought of it.

One firefighter follows the descent of a jumper, helpless to act.

When the body hits the ground with an explosive thump, he curses in frustration.

One person, the falling man, as he came to be known, stood in for all the others who died unseen, other jumpers, other people (mostly men) who died that day. (Richard Drew, Associated Press)

Despite television camera aversion to showing jumpers during the non-stop catastrophe coverage, the *New York Times* published this photograph on September 12, 2001. The stillness of that one moment in the 10-second fall belies the violence of his death. But I think the *New York Times* knew this, and counted on the photo's ability to distill the catastrophic moment.

The documentary, *104 Minutes that Changed America*, conveys this in non-visual forms as well. Over a long take of the image of the burning towers, in voiceover we hear the command post in the South tower hail the dispatch office for a run down of the firefighting companies then in the tower. The dispatcher reads off the call numbers of a division, a high rise, 3 battalions, 13 ladders, and 24 engines. It takes 59 seconds. Fourteen minutes after the names are read off, the top of the South tower breaks off and the building collapses.

Many firefighters caught on film were lost that day.

The stricken concrete bodies of the towers stand in for the largely undepicted falling bodies, and those crushed inside the buildings. 9/11 is an event that, even in documentary form, can only be expressed indirectly. (Photograph *20/20*)

As the South tower collapsed, a giant debris cloud roared down the canyons of lower Manhattan. People ran and took cover as the mass wiped out the daylight. A fire dispatcher paged the South tower.
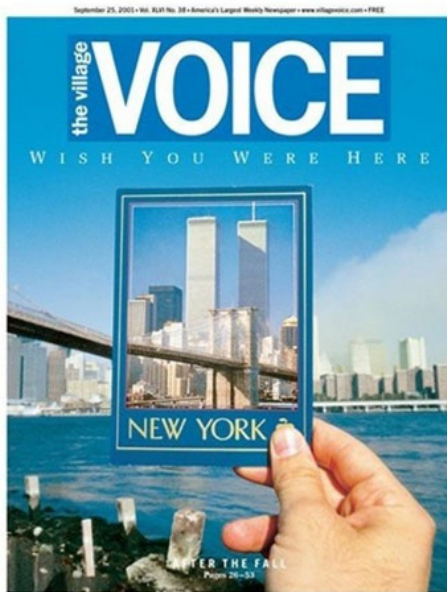

There was no response.

Stunned and ash-ridden firefighters capture the texture of feeling for a day of horror when words failed.

The structuring absence of what we cannot see continued to haunt the collective memory of 9/11.

And like a bodily phantom limb pain, the towers reappear in not-quite-there spectral fashion. The cover of the September 21, 2001 issue of the *Village Voice* sought to restore them to the skyline.
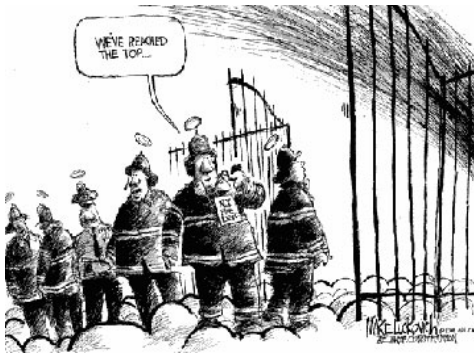

As did the art installation, "Tribute in Light," located next to the World Trade Center site (originally March 11, 2002).

But German artist Gerhard Richter's 2005 painting, "September" retained the sense of violence and destruction disavowed in other tributes.
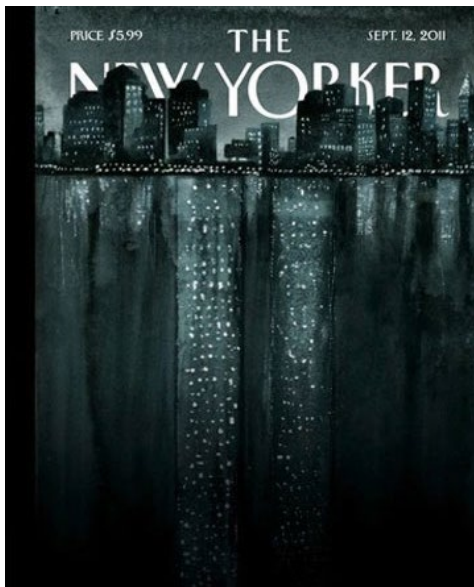
That sense of their ongoing trace memory was revisited recently on the September 12, 2011 cover of *The New Yorker*.

Each year, commemorative ceremonies at Ground Zero feature the reading of the names, brief tributes to the departed, to remember the collective loss. Family members seek to reinscribe the dead in the continuity of family life.

The search for continuity after death takes other forms as well. The 2011 *20/20* montage of side-by-side photographs of the 10-year olds not yet born on 9/11 and their fathers, played up their resemblance.

Some commemorative efforts take solace in divine restitution. (Mike Lukovich in the *Atlanta Constitution*)

During the 2011 commemorative ceremonies, newscasters discussed the new One World Trade Center, formerly known as the Freedom Tower, and the Memorial site as signs of the collective moving on. But the proclivity of anchors to refer to the security concerns surrounding the anniversary complicated the closure to which they referred, raising once again the threat of terrorism and the strictures of living with the ongoing security apparatus. (Author's photograph taken Jan. 28, 2012)

On suffering and human eloquence: commemorating 9/11, televised U.S. coverage in 2011

by Isabel Pinedo

The attack on 9/11 2001 was a media event, aimed at national landmarks, designed to be televised, photographed, seen as a spectacle. The anniversary commemorations have been high profile media events since 2002, intended to build community, but haunted by the question of how much to show—"is it too soon?"— and how to avoid the appearance of exploitation. The tenth anniversary in 2011 coincided with the death of Osama Bin Laden, the near-completion of the Freedom Tower, the opening of the Memorial site to the public, and the year that some families returned to Ground Zero for the first time since 2002. In addition to recycling iconic images in commemorative programming, the networks attempted to resignify 9/11 in the public imagination as a moment of rebirth and closure. Television networks aired over 40 commemorative programs in the week leading up to September 11th, providing competing frameworks through which the country could remember the attack.

How do we narrate disaster to ourselves? More to the point, how does television commemorate a catastrophic moment in recent American history without alienating audience? Networks responded with programs that used different narrative modes. News-oriented coverage, the vast majority of special programming, provided context narratives:

- a heroic administration (*Timeline of Terror)*;
- the blunders of Bush policy (*Day of Destruction: Decade of War)*; the heroism of the fallen (*Beyond Bravery: The Women of 9/11)*;
- the continuity of family (*20/20: Remembrance and Renewal 10 Years After the 9/11 Attacks*).

The desire to construct a redemptive narrative is apparent in all of them, whether through depicting leadership in the aftermath of the attack, the ability to critique in order to correct misguided policy, appreciation for those who died trying to save others, or by presenting the progeny of the dead, respectively. There was minor coverage of women as heroes and of widowers,

though the main thrust of the coverage still casts men as heroes and women as widows or victims. In part this reflects the disproportionate number of men who died on 9/11, but it also indicates the downplaying of women's heroic deeds in the dominant narrative of 9/11 and its aftermath.

Range of programming

Throughout the years, the meaning of 9/11 has been interpreted in conflicting ways. Media coverage was affected by both the political orientation of the channel and the network "brand" or corporate identity, which media outlets adopt and foster to distinguish them in the media glut. These brand identities influence the approach networks take in their coverage. The History Channel mounted sober feature-length documentaries such as *102 Minutes that Changed America* (Rittenmeyer and Skundrick, 2008). This un-narrated compilation film of professional and amateur, hand-held footage and recordings archived from 40 sources captures the texture of feeling for a day of horror when words failed. In contrast to the strong sense of immediacy conveyed by the documentary film, most channels presented narrated or host-driven news specials. An Animal Planet show, *Saved*, focused on how dogs save traumatized people in the aftermath of loss. Appealing to the station's animal-loving target audience, the focus was on victimized families and heroic dogs, avoiding even the interpersonal complexities of the situations portrayed. Similarly CNN's *Beyond Bravery: The Women of 9/11* approached the under-recognition of female first responders in a bland, melodramatic manner with a studied avoidance of a feminist perspective. The Univision program *Especial 9/11: Diez Años Despues* (9/11 Special: Ten Years Later) highlighted the role of Latinos connected to the attack or the memorial, but did so while providing a critical account of such things as site-related health problems. ABC's *20/20: Remembrance and Renewal 10 Years After the 9/11 Attacks* featured, as 1 of 6 segments, one on the babies born after 9/11 to the wives of the dead. The segment concluded with a heartstring-pulling montage of side-by-side photographs of the 10-year olds and the fathers they resemble, to the heart-rending lyrics of "I'm Already There."

Other news shows took a more decidedly hard news approach, presenting historically embedded narratives. MSNBC's three-part *Day of Destruction: Decade of War* hosted by Rachel Maddow and Richard Engel staged a highly critical dissection of U.S. foreign and domestic policy of the past decade, linking the billions of dollars going to profit-motivated security contractors and the "new normal of intrusion" to the debt-driven economic collapse of 2008.[1][open endnotes in new window] From the other end of the spectrum, FOX cable news' *Timeline of Terror* was true to its "patriotic" brand. It presented a fear mongering account that aggrandized Bush and his Administration. Sourcing was heavily skewed to Republican politicians and FOX station archival accounts, ending triumphantly with a picture of Bin Laden labeled "deceased." In both these cases we see networks build partisan community, using niche marketing aimed at specific demographic slices, progressives and conservatives respectively.

Also in a critical vein, Al-Jazeera English produced a multipart special, *The*

9/11 Decade that featured Al-Qaeda sources shunned by U.S. media, as well as FBI and CIA sources, to provide a counter-narrative on the effects of U.S. foreign policy. For instance, the invasion of Iraq is characterized as invigorating Al-Qaeda, transforming it from a man and a group to a philosophy and a movement.

The most uniform coverage was the live broadcast of the commemoration ceremony, which followed the precedent of previous anniversary coverage and was sourced from a shared feed to minimize camera intrusion on the participants. The hour prior to this was host-centered, full of chatter, insipid remarks, and politicians who inserted themselves into the narrative of the attack or its aftermath. But when it came to the commercial-free ceremony coverage, the variations were few. Local NYC stations focused on the memorial at Ground Zero. NBC relied on local coverage, but differentiated its broadcast by retaining the insert shots of photos of the dead even when the camera cut away from the podium to mourners at the memorial pools. In contrast, CNN Int'l, oriented to international distribution, broke from Ground Zero to the multiple ceremonial sites at the Pentagon, Shanksville PA, and elsewhere. It also broke more often from the reading of the names soundtrack to a voiceover of largely unsentimental policy oriented commentary and the reactions of Federal insiders, such as Ari Fleischer, on the day of the attack.

The tone of the ceremony was elegiac and mournful. Free of ads and largely free of host commentary, family members of the dead took center stage. The five-hour litany of names was interrupted only intermittently when local and national politicians did short readings; prominent musicians performed; and bell tolls at the hour of each plane crash, and the collapse of each tower.

The family members who read the names did so in the lower tones of sadness or the higher register of grief. The impact of the readings drew from the accretion of names and testimonials which conveyed the enormity of the loss, and from the contagion effect of grief, as the camera largely remained steadfastly on the faces of the bereaved, their voices layered with instrumental music played at the scene.

The mini-eulogy and the documentary approach use a narrative mode to build community that revolves around affect. Each mourner in their own way delivered powerful, sympathy-inducing expressions of the human suffering precipitated by the attacks of 9/11. A closer analysis of what made the commemorative eulogies and the film, *102 Minutes that Changed America,* so effective follows.

The eloquence of human suffering: the documentary approach

The live micro-eulogies of family members and the sober documentaries produced by the History Channel, which featured live footage of the attack, both presented without commercial interruption, eloquently expressed human suffering without becoming melodramatic. In the commemoration ceremony, human suffering was displayed through the face and voice of

family members, the poignant failure of words, the reliance on clichés, the truncated simplicity of the statement, or a voice choking in mid-stride.

Similarly, the un-narrated documentary replayed the familiar 102-minute timeline of the attack and collapse of the towers, punctuated by the faces of bystanders and firefighters, and the silhouettes of people crowded 4 to 5 deep at the windows in the burning towers. The documentary's use of iconic imagery and ambient sound – sirens, fire truck horns, newscasters, words of alarm from onlookers, screams – was amplified by its scoring. Almost every minute of footage in *102 Minutes that Changed America* was overlaid with dread-inducing music typical of the horror film. The underscore, together with the anguish and dread on the faces of onlookers, conveyed and restaged the mix of feelings shared on that day by eyewitnesses and television viewers around the world. Without narration, few voices appear on the soundtrack: a 911 operator instructing a trapped caller to stay inside the building and wait for rescue; a firefighter's eyes following a falling body and cursing when it hits the ground with an explosive thump; an off-screen amateur videographer telling his off-screen wife that the man at the window waving a white shirt has fallen out. It is with the oblique depiction of "jumpers" that the documentary walks a fine line between presenting the only visible evidence of ongoing death, and restraint. Much is left to the imagination, as it was in 2001 as well. The falling bodies can only be seen in long shot without detail, hitting the ground off-screen. The only body part we see is during the cleanup, when the camera pans past a reddish mound on the ground, quite a ways from the splintered remains of the tower. But the film does give an indication of how prevalent the sight of jumpers was that day.

As Tom Junod describes it in his 2003 *Esquire* article, "The Falling Man":

> "They jumped continually, from all four sides of the [North Tower], and from all floors above and around the building's fatal wound….For more than an hour and a half, they streamed from the building, one after another, consecutively rather than en masse, as if each individual required the sight of another individual jumping before mustering the courage to jump himself or herself."

U.S. networks censored the magnitude of the response, the impulse to flinch from the flames and the smoke, ostensibly to protect the public, the dignity of the dead, and their professional reputations as defined by mainstream U.S. standards. *USA Today,* drawing on eyewitness accounts, forensic evidence, and video recordings, concluded that at least two hundred people died by jumping. Network coverage of the event in 2001 quickly censored the images of falling bodies, but not the horror-stricken expressions of onlookers. The realization in retrospect, that many of the horrified reactions televised during the catastrophe coverage of the event were due to watching people jump to their deaths, results in

> "an almost vertiginous sensation of the ground giving way beneath our feet…[as we] revise what [we] thought [we] knew about how people died on 9/11" (Junod, 2012) .

But the absence of bodies is more than the result of censorship. It is a structuring absence of the event itself, perhaps most stunningly manifested in the "missing" posters tacked on telephone and lampposts all over the city. Many remains have never been found. Incinerated or buried, they are still unrecoverable. The documentary shows people falling, though not in numbers that suggest the estimated 200 who died that way. The larger stream of falling bodies and the voices on the other end of 911 calls can be found on the internet, but not in the documentary, not even ten years later.

The documentary reenacts the trauma of watching the attack, but it differs from the catastrophe coverage of 2001 in several key ways. First, it cherry picks the most powerful or the most high-resolution images from various sources not available for broadcast at the time. It culls images shot by professional and amateur alike, images taken as the event itself unfolded, sometimes recording events accidentally. Second, the diversity of footage allows the event to be shown from various vantage points taken in the surrounding vicinity from the ground and from the air. The blend of multi-camera, multi-format perspectives suggests a sutured picture of the whole. Third, the pervasiveness of high definition television and reception in the U.S. home allows for clearer images than were available in 2001. Fourth, the inclusion of recordings of 911 dispatchers played over footage of a burning tower confronts the viewer with the distressing contradiction between what must have been the anguish of the caller inside the building and the insistence of the dispatchers to stay put. Heard in the present with the knowledge of what is to come, with the understanding that their advice is terribly misguided, it refreshes our sense of the magnitude of despair, and fills the sympathetic viewer with a sense of dread that revisits that day.

Watching is hard to bear. In that sense, the documentary reenacts the trauma of that day for viewers in and outside NY. The documentary once again places the viewer in the spectator position of witness to a specific, imminent threat, one that violates basic expectations about what can happen, unable to act, helpless as events unfold. This is the state philosopher Robert Solomon calls "real horror," one that requires narrative, suspense, and spectacle. The larger narrative we know.[2] No narration is required, just an occasional time stamp. Suspense is created by our knowledge of how much further the situation will deteriorate, coupled with unfamiliar footage from amateur videographers, and honed by the underscore. The towers embody the spectacle of death. The visual focus of the film alternates between faces—of emergency personnel and bystanders, falling bodies, and the towers—punctured by a plane, burning, collapsing in a crush of debris. The stricken concrete bodies of the towers are a displacement, a synecdochic moment, a stand in for the largely undepicted falling bodies, and those crushed inside the buildings.[3]True to Kristiaan Versluys's characterization, 9/11 is an event that, even in documentary form, can only be expressed through "allegory and indirection" (14).

There are no personal narratives here[4] though the details of individual faces, especially the stream of fire fighters heading into the buildings, now that we know the outcome, refuses the viewer a distanced position. The compilation format avoids the reduction of traumatic event to the personal

meaning it has for an individual. In the documentary, meaning exceeds personal meaning. Inter-subjective experience is downplayed while "the immediacy of affective shock" is given prominence. (Cetinic, 288)

Foremost, the documentary tries to re-create the physical and affective experience of 9/11 as an overwhelming event. The unfolding catastrophe coverage in 2001 included phone calls to news anchors from people who gave testimony to what they were witnessing and to their emotions, often conveyed in a physical manner. As Britta Timm Knudsen analyzes this coverage,

> "[T]hese witnesses do not fulfill a cognitive purpose—they fulfill an affective purpose: they tell us what it is like to be physically placed in such a dangerous situation. The television viewer experiences the situation *through* these witnesses, through their bodies." (119, emphasis in original)

A similar effect is created in the documentary by insert shots of horror-stricken eyewitnesses on the scene. By cross cutting these reaction shots with images of the burning buildings, some of which show people piled at windows, but not with images of falling bodies, the documentary refuses to attribute the source of their horror directly to jumpers.

The camera assumes the role of, what Luc Boltanski calls, the "tactful camera," one that exercises restraint while it points to what it is leaving out. The tactful camera refrains from showing us images deemed too upsetting. We see bystanders looking up, but not what were reported to be the most distressing images. We see the horrified expression of firefighters responding to an unexpectedly loud thud, indexical sign of a violent death, but we do not see those bodies. The sudden shift from quiet to loud is startling, but coupled with the firefighter's distressed face, it is harrowing, perhaps because it leaves so much to the imagination. Similarly, we hear the 911 dispatchers, but not the voices of distressed callers from the building. This abridged depiction represents a camera that makes ethical choices to protect the viewer. The tactful camera does the looking away from the moment of death for us.

Though the images are riveting, and the soundtrack often unobtrusive, the importance of the soundtrack cannot be underestimated. Almost the entire film is underscored, but with varying levels of conspicuousness. The underscore is highly variable, non-melodic, often pairing two discordant minor chords—a deep bass rumble and a high pitch whine—to foster a disquieting mood. Sometimes the score resembles a sound effect, as when the music simulates the sound of the image with which it is paired, for instance when smoke billows from one of the towers (20:01-20:15). At other times, the music increases tempo to generate suspense. Shortly before the second tower falls, a fast rhythmic clicking is paired with a bass rumble until the tower plummets. The pulsating rhythmic notes increase in pace and volume, creating a sense of urgency. Much of the underscoring here and elsewhere creates a sense of dread and enhances the haunting qualities of the film, which won Emmys in 2009 for sound editing and sound mixing.[5]

After the first tower falls, and the debris cloud passes, it is momentary silence that speaks the loudest. A fire dispatcher pages the tower, with no response.

The film is highly edited, sewing together scenes from many different sources, both amateur and professional. It is the underscoring that sutures together the many visual cuts as they transition – from the footage of a resident in a nearby building peering out a window, to someone on the ground, to the view from a subway train going over the bridge, to close-ups of the burning tower taken from a helicopter. The sound is practically invisible much of the time, and all the more effective for it. It even renders the highly edited nature of the visuals less evident.

Viewers could even overlook the well-executed sound and picture editing. Indeed, some website posters credited the film's rhetorical and affective power to its unedited, and un-narrated character.

> "Such a powerful film. Having no narrative makes you feel like you were there. True, unbiased, and haunting reality."
> (Topdocumentaryfilms, Mike, June 2011)

Mike's comment mistakenly equates narrative with voiceover narration, but it also suggests the degree to which the film is able to replicate the confusion and trepidation of that day, resulting in a forceful viewing experience.

> "...I don't think there has been any other video that has touched me as much as this one. I think it is because it is unedited and there is no real commentary. I was moved..." (Amazon, Nini, Aug. 29, 2011).

Nini's comment fails to register the highly edited nature of a film where footage (IMDb credits 40 names for footage) was actively selected to represent a given moment in a linear chronology. The gripping imagery's recollection of events, together with an underscore that more often than not does not draw attention to itself, is read as a lack of mediation, but this is a very carefully constructed film that won an Emmy for Outstanding Picture Editing.

In addition to the compelling images and disturbing underscore, the inclusion of reaction shots, present since the catastrophe coverage, is vital to the affective force of the film. The reaction shots present us with "...impressions of [the] event in the eyes, faces and gestures of other viewers...[so that viewers] are invited to become emotionally involved in the scenario" (Knudsen, 123). A similar effect is achieved in the coverage of the ceremonial reading of the names.

The eloquence of human suffering: the mini-eulogy

The focus of the ceremonial eulogies is on the way loved ones lived, for the most part, not on how they died. The commemoration was characterized by the solemnity due a newly marked grave. A pair of readers, family members chosen by lottery, standing behind two podiums took turns reciting names, ending with a tribute to their loved one. Usually brief, said in the composed dull ache of sadness, sometimes pierced by the sharp sting of grief. A Muslim woman, Talat Hamdani, who lost her son, "my breath, my life," hails his heroism in the name of democratic values including, pointedly, freedom of religion (3:48).[6][open endnotes in new window]

> "And my son, Mohammed Salman Hamdani, my breath, my life. Your brothers Addan and Zishan, and I, daily miss you, every moment of our lives. [Her voice rises in pitch.] You rushed into the burning towers to rescue humanity, and transcended the barriers of race, faith, and ethnicity, and gave the ultimate sacrifice. Abu died 2 years later. You *are* my strength and courage. America acknowledges your sacrifice and honors you today. You died defending the American values of democracy, liberty, *and* freedom to pursue a faith of your choice. You are not only my young Jedi, but you are America's young Jedi, and America salutes you." [She salutes. Applause.] (My transcriptions throughout, emphasis in original, 3:48)

The "update" of a birth or death in the family delivered to the loved one seeks to inscribe the departed in the continuity of family life. But the eulogy also frames him as a national hero. As a Muslim woman, one whose disappeared son was investigated by law enforcement on suspicion of terrorism, in part because he was born in Pakistan, it is significant that she positions him in the larger framework of "America's young Jedi". A key function of the commemoration is to define the community that was attacked, to characterize what it means to be an American—"[to die] defending...American values". She does so in eloquent terms, but even awkward deliveries are suffused with pathos.

A man, holding a flag, eyes cast down, loses his voice momentarily when he names his brother, only to resume speaking in a gravelly voice. "It's ten years, but it's still not easy." (3:21). The inadequacy of words to convey his feelings, even when reading from a scripted micro-eulogy, allows his silence to speak. Sometimes the weight of the loss is conveyed by its atypicality, as with the

woman who lost not one, but two people at the site—a daughter and a husband (3:10). Even cliché-ridden tributes, delivered in emotionally saturated ways or with studied restraint, cut through the hardened layers of critical distance and the distance of time. A young police officer, holding up her father's photo, relies on clichés to deliver a stirring tribute to her fire fighter dad.

> "And my father, firefighter Robert James Crawford, Safety Battalion 1, who served our country with the United States Air Force, and served our city as a New York City firefighter for 32 and a half years. He was a great husband, father, brother, and friend. We love you Daddy, to infinity and back. We will never forget you. We will always love you. And, as you always said, Daddy, 'we got your back.' God bless New York City and God bless America." (2:29)

The grief of family members is contagious, and the hours-long stream of names carries a cumulative emotional impact.[7] It is evident that many of them are still haunted by the memory of how their loved one died.

The magnitude of the loss is evident in the numbers and the diversity of the dead. Various ethnicities are represented and tributes include sprinkles of phrases in Spanish, Italian, Thai, and Hebrew. There is also an occasional dissident voice. One man who lost his daughter explicitly blames "radical Islamists" (4:55). A woman who lost her husband uncharacteristically takes 1 min. 12 sec. to speak of "those who were murdered," "the horror that happened here 10 years ago," and unabated pain. "Ten years and we're still without satisfactory answers to what went on this day, and how this event *could* have happened to our great nation, leaving a void for so many families." (4:14) This eulogy stands out from the characteristic distillation of human loss by couching the plaint in a protest.

Conclusion

The reading of the names rang true as an expression of grief, as an expression of memory, and as a testament to the immense loss. It echoed key moments of "the 9/11 visual canon"—the missing posters, and the *NY Times* "Portraits of Grief", with their capsule summaries of a life. (Hutchings, 213)

The repeated references to 9/11 as a defining moment, a day that changed everything, explicitly by anchors, implicitly by family members, refers to the transformative power of trauma. (Cetinic, 290) The event traumatized the nation and razed or damaged iconic landmarks. It is in this vein that the rise of the Freedom Tower, prominent in the hour-long programs that preceded the ceremony, signifies recovery. The silent pools simultaneously represent the stunned silence of trauma and the ability to stop speaking about it that marks healing.

But the proclivity of anchors to refer to the security concerns surrounding the anniversary, not only resituated 9/11 in the official war on terror framework, but also complicated the closure to which the hosts referred. There is a

tendency in the anniversary coverage to conflate the collective "grief" precipitated largely by the fear invoked by security threats, with the reiterative personal grief of the family members of the 9/11 dead.[9] The defining moment that the sudden death of a loved one represents for grieving family members is conflated with the defining moment that 9/11 represents for most Americans in the threat of terrorism and living with the strictures of the ongoing security apparatus.

The documentaries[10] trade more than the other programs in recalling the horror of the sheer magnitude of the terrorist attack. Collective memory of the attack is intensified by public sympathy for those who died, but ultimately rests on both a personal and collective sense of threat. The documentaries grapple with trauma, embrace the horror of the event, defining it as a moment of failure, and recall the collective social memory of helplessness, terror, and loss. They replay the haunting images of collapsing skyscrapers, debris clouds, and a manqué skyline. Sporadic images of people falling, the only visible evidence of the suffering that preceded death, serve as a synecdoche for the suffering in the buildings and planes. Sustained images of the towers collapsing and disintegrating stand in for images of the human wreckage contained therein. They function as a proxy for the larger nightmare unobserved by the media, possibly even invoking the destruction and loss of life caused by the subsequent ten years of war in Afghanistan and Iraq.[11]

Commemoration revisits the site of injury. It simultaneously reopens the wound and allows the viewer to process it from the vantage point of ten years passed. Whether these programs succeed in allowing viewers "to bear witness to trauma" without re-traumatizing themselves is unclear. (Prince, 12-13) Anniversary events amplify memory and loss, so the draw to participate in this collective remembering is complex and rooted in collective memory, motivated by a desire to bear witness to atrocity, to honor the lost, and perhaps to find closure—not the absence of ambiguity but the strength to live with uncertainty and loss. (Carlin and Park-Fuller, 33) The danger of the media frames lies in reducing the collective trauma of 9/11 and its aftermath to the level of the individual when the scope of the attack, from intent to abiding consequences, and the commemorative process are so decisively social.

Go to Notes page

Notes

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. According to a Pew Research Center poll taken in 2011, the nation is divided over whether U.S. wrongdoing prior to the attack motivated it – 43% yes vs. 45% no. This near tie indicates a repositioning since 2001 when only 33% said yes, while 55% said no. Republicans still reject this idea, but Democrats and Independents have shifted. Similarly, majorities think the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have either increased our chances of being attacked or have made no difference.[return to page 2]

2. Although the narrative sequence is familiar to us, there are surprises, as when we hear the train-like roar of the debris cloud speeding down the street.

3. Similarly, Kevin Wetmore discusses how the horror film has allegorized 9/11 since 2002, though the inflection here is different from that in the novels of which Versluys speaks. In the horror film, these iconic images appeal to the public fascination with the ruined body – be it the remains of a fragment of a jumper or the broken shards of a Twin Tower – what Mark Seltzer refers to as "wound culture."

4. Personal meaning is found in the supplementary documentary, *Witnesses to 9/11*, which presents filmmakers whose work is included in *102 Minutes* in confessional mode.

5. In the 2009 non-fiction programming category, sound designer and co-director, Seth Skundrick won an Emmy for Outstanding Sound Editing, and re-recording mixer Damon Trotta won for Outstanding Sound Mixing. Skundrick also won an Emmy for Outstanding Picture Editing. Composer Brendon Anderegg is credited with the original music for the film.

6. The story of how her son was investigated by the FBI on suspicion of terrorism was dramatized in Mira Nair's segment *India* in the compilation film *11'09"01* (2002).[return to page 3]

7.The recitation in 2011 was longer because it marked the opening of the national Memorial at Ground Zero. This is why it included the names of people who died in the attack on the Twin Towers in 1993, the Pentagon strike, and the plane that went down in Shanksville, Pennsylvania. Together with the readings by politicians and musical performances, it took almost 5 hours to air.

8. With the exception of the broadcast of the film, *Loose Change*, there was a noticeable absence of any reference to the 9/11-truth movement in the broadcasts.

9. Personal communication, Heather Levi, Feb. 19, 2012.

10. The History Channel documentary, *9/11: The Days After*, also a compilation film, dealt with serious consequences and the texture of life after the attack, and aired without commercial breaks.

11. Synecdoche marks 9/11 at many levels. Recall the missing person posters that shortly became funerary, standing in for the bodies not recovered.

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Ex-marine Brian Steidle trades his gun for a camera, photographing in Darfur to document genocide in the region (*The Devil Came on Horseback,* 2007).

Steidle brings binders full of photographs back to the U.S., including many gruesome images of corpses.

Streaming death: the politics of dying on YouTube

by Jennifer Malkowski

"Photographs of an atrocity may give rise to opposing responses. A call for peace. A cry for revenge. Or simply the bemused awareness, continually restocked by photographic information, that terrible things happen." – Susan Sontag[1] [open endnotes in new window]

There is an axiom that threads through the history of documentary media, a belief each new generation of image-makers reaffirms. To discard or doubt it, perhaps, would shake the form's foundations too dramatically. The belief is in the ability to decrease war and violence through the documentary representation of war and violence – that if a photograph, say, can perfectly communicate "the horrors of war," then its viewers will come to oppose war and promote peace.

In the documentary *The Devil Came on Horseback* (2007), an ex-marine turned military observer, Brian Steidle, carries that belief with him as he journeys to the Darfur region of Sudan in 2004. Unable to capture the brutal Janjaweed militia's attacks on villages as they happen, Steidle documents the corpses with the razor-sharp visuals digital photography provides. He shows young and old bodies felled by gunshot, beating, burning alive, and so on – all in painful detail. Deliberating about what to do with his images, he expresses a confidence that,

"If these photos were released to the public, there would be troops in here in a matter of days."

Once the horrors of war he records have emotionally worn him down, Steidle returns to the United States, allows his photos to be published in the *New York Times*, does interviews with major news channels, and goes on the road to present on the crisis in Darfur. But the images he spreads do not make the impact that Steidle *knew* they would; as he sees it, they fail to inspire tangible action on behalf of Darfur. Instead, many of their viewers appear to absorb only Sontag's "bemused awareness . . . that terrible things happen." The documentary thus draws to a downbeat conclusion as Steidle arrives at a similar insight:

"I definitely look at the world differently now. I knew that bad things happened; I didn't know that people would stand by and allow them to happen. I honestly thought as I wrote an email home that if the people of America could see what I've seen there would be troops here in one week . . . [T]hat's not true at all. They've seen it now and we've still done nothing."

Setting out to tour the country with his images, Steidle is convinced that once Americans see them, the U.S. will send troops to the region.

But finishing the press circuit without tangible results, he learns a hard lesson about the depleted power of the corpse photograph in the twenty-first century United States.

Documentary glimpses of the "moment of death" – the dying rather than the dead – often have greater political impact than corpse photographs like Steidle's (Eddie Adams, *Saigon Execution*, 1968).

The credits roll soon after his statement and nudge the viewer toward action with a web URL and the message:

> "There is a growing movement to end the crisis in Darfur. You can make a difference."

Considering the way *The Devil Came on Horseback* has documented the dissolution of Steidle's own faith in this sentiment, the earnest words scrolling by on screen convey an unintended irony.

Steidle's assumptions about his pictures – and the "horrors of war" axiom they exemplify – overlook the effect that a century and a half of graphic war photos and footage have had on the U.S. public. Because the period of history spanned by camera technology is so crowded with atrocities, corpses and their documentary traces have become almost clichéd signifiers of the terrible things that happen in the world. Their effectiveness in centuries past – perpetrator photographs appropriated for anti-lynching pamphlets, concentration camp images that evidenced genocide by the Nazis – has lost potency in the twenty-first. Thus, while Steidle's pictures are certainly gruesome, they are ultimately too familiar in their subjects and aesthetics to make the impact he wants. A corpse photograph, like Steidle's, can feel like an image made too late — a still representation of a still object that can only gesture toward the absent last moments of the person who once inhabited it. As Vivian Sobchack writes, in these images,

> "Our sympathy for the subject who once was is undermined by our alienation from the object that is."[2]

Indeed, the most legendary entries in the annals of politically useful death images are not of corpses. The photo and film footage of General Nguyen Ngoc Loan executing handcuffed prisoner Nguyen Van Lém in 1968 Saigon instead depict the enigmatic transition from living person to dead body. Eddie Adams' iconic photo of this event, *Saigon Execution*, offers a long, hard stare at what appears to be the "moment of death" itself in the contortions of Lém's face as he is shot, point-blank, in the head. The image has a popular reputation as having caused a major turning point in the Vietnam War – shifting public opinion into opposition to U.S. involvement. Despite evidence from historians that media coverage followed rather than precipitated this change in attitudes, the legend that Adams' picture played a large role in ending the war – that this one image of a life ending truly made "a difference" – persists.[3]

In their use by activists, images of actual death best satisfies the challenging questions that haunt their very existence: *Why* should we make and look at them? What right have we to do so? In this article, I examine the activist use of documentary death in conjunction with digital media. I consider shifts in the production and distribution of such material, as well as longtime characteristics of politically effective documentary death that remain constant

(and, indeed, become more apparent) in the digital age.

On the production side, cell phone cameras represent a massive technological shift not so much in kind but in scale. These easy-to-operate digital recording devices travel in the pockets and purses of billions, vastly increasing the likelihood that a death in public will happen in a camera's vicinity. Distribution changes have been equally dramatic, as the Internet allows these cell phone users to circulate what they capture easily and at no cost. Some of their videos will go viral, with all the rapid and unfettered movement that word implies. Or, if one prefers, they will become "spreadable media" – a phrase Henry Jenkins uses to counter the term viral's connotations of autonomous proliferation in an unchanged form.

If activist videos of death are "spreadable," then YouTube, the Internet's most popular worldwide destination for streaming video, is the primary place where people spread them. The site, launched in 2005, quickly become a hub for participatory culture and the notion of interactivity so central to new media theory and Web 2.0. In terms of activist videos, and especially for activist videos of death, the notion of participation is especially charged. Studying these videos on YouTube reveals the extent to which witnessing in that space can facilitate doing, but also the very real limitations of actions emerging in that scenario. Jodi Dean notes how the Internet seems to promise that we can witness and then take action immediately through interactive commenting, reposting, petition circulating, and so on. But, Dean writes, sites like YouTube make us surprisingly passive:

> "Discussion, far from displaced, has itself become a barrier against acts as action is perpetually postponed . . . It's easier to set up a new blog than it is to undertake the ground-level organizational work of building alternatives. It's also difficult to think through the ways our practices and activities are producing new subjectivities, subjectivities that may well be more accustomed to quick satisfaction and bits of enjoyment than to planning, discipline, sacrifice, and delay."[4]

Further, despite wide accessibility that welcomes non-professional media makers and provides new ways to consume, too, YouTube is hardly a digital utopia – even as a space for just witnessing. The site presents raw video without the context often necessary to understand what is being depicted, and simultaneously creates another context that feels awkward and insensitive: that of seeing somber activist videos posted alongside clips of skateboard stunts and pets being tickled. In her innovative video-book *Learning from YouTube*, Alexandra Juhasz puts it bluntly:

> "[YouTube is] a context that is not ideal for activism, analysis, or community."[5]

Activists who wish to spread death videos on YouTube also face a challenge in the site's "Community Guidelines," which limit graphic content. One guideline reads,

> "YouTube is not a shock site. Don't post gross-out videos of accidents, dead bodies or similar things *intended* to shock or disgust" [my emphasis].[6]

YouTube tries to identify and remove most footage of actual violence or death by relying on a system of user "flagging," but makes exceptions that are outlined in the site's Community Guidelines.

But YouTube sets out to judge "shock" clips by (somewhat) specific criteria rather than excluding all such content – a judgment that takes place when users flag a video as inappropriate and YouTube employees then decide whether to remove it or add an age restriction. The expanded guidelines elaborate on these criteria:

> "If a video is particularly graphic or disturbing, it should be balanced with additional context and information. For instance, including a clip from a slaughter house in a video on factory farming may be appropriate. However, stringing together unrelated and gruesome clips of animals being slaughtered in a video may be considered gratuitous if its purpose is to shock rather than illustrate."

Here, YouTube adopts the spirit of Supreme Court Justice William Brennan's definition of obscenity, offered during *United States v. Roth* in 1957: that which is "utterly without redeeming social importance." The site avoids harboring "death porn" by requiring some intention (however their employees see fit to determine it) for the material beyond shock, sensationalism, or disrespect, and by banning "unrelated and gruesome clips . . . [strung] together." Statements about the role of context on the site are especially interesting here. YouTube suggests that graphic material "should be balanced with additional context and information," seeming to recognize the tendency of its own format (favoring short, user-uploaded videos) to omit adequate context. As activist videos of death on YouTube illustrate, the malleability of these guidelines and their dependence on human judgment allow the site to distribute death videos in many circumstances – when YouTube administrators decide they are educational, or, indeed, when they could "make a difference" in a cause deemed worthy.

Relatively early in the histories of cell phone footage and of YouTube, two sets of death videos that were fully integrated into activist causes circulated heavily on the site – never removed by administrators despite activists' fears that they would be. They depict the 2009 killings of Oscar Grant in Oakland, California and Neda Agha-Soltan in Tehran. Their comparison reveals the importance of analyzing the content of individual clips when considering death documentary rather than lumping all such recordings together in a sweeping judgment about their ethics.

As little as we generally think about aesthetics in raw video shot by non-professionals on cell phones, I want to highlight their importance in both sets of videos. Through them, I argue that an audiovisual resemblance to the vision of death presented by mainstream, commercial cinema is most likely to generate audience sympathy and media attention via YouTube (ironically, since the site achieved its initial popularity by offering user-generated alternatives to that mode). Further, I argue that the tendency of most streaming video to strip away an event's context greatly shapes the ways viewers understand the depicted deaths – but not always in a decidedly *negative* sense, as some have claimed.

"The whole world is watching"...on YouTube: activist videos of death

The videos of Oscar Grant III show the death of this 22-year-old African American father at the hands of transit police in Oakland, California. In the first few hours of 2009, Grant was returning from New Year's Eve celebrations when BART (Bay Area Rapid Transit) police stopped his train at Oakland's Fruitvale station. Responding to reports of a fight that allegedly

included Grant, four officers detained him and his friends on the platform as a train full of passengers watched the scene – and in some cases recorded it.

At least five passengers and one mounted security camera recorded the arrest as it unfolded.

Oscar Grant (left) sits in custody on the train platform moments before officer Johannes Mehserle shoots and kills him.

After officers Johannes Mehserle and Tony Pirone pushed Grant facedown on the ground and attempted to handcuff him, Mehserle drew his gun and shot Grant fatally in the back. Mehserle later claimed that he thought Grant might be reaching for a weapon and had mistaken his own gun for his Taser in his effort to subdue Grant. In fact, no one in Grant's party was armed.

Footage has reached the public from six cameras that captured parts of this event; some of the videos aired on the local news and on YouTube within days of the shooting, and others emerged during Mehserle's criminal trial.[7] The mounted security camera at Fruitvale station was directed at the tracks and outer edge of the platform, recording only the train's arrival and departure, its passengers watching the arrest, and peripheral movements from officers.

In a figurative passing of the torch from one surveillance technology to another, handheld digital cameras and cell phone cameras vastly outperformed this mounted security camera in documenting Grant's death, reinforcing a sense of the latter as yesterday's model of the Panopticon. Five portable cameras recorded the arrest from different angles, and three of those had Grant in frame when Mehserle fired his fatal shot. The density of cameras watching the police on that night registers in Margarita Carazo's footage, in which Tommy Cross, Jr.'s camera, also recording, hovers at the corner of the frame, displaying a miniaturized duplicate on its LCD screen of the arrest we are watching. None of these witnesses, however, were able to get very close to the action, and the three that did enframe the shooting could present only an obscured view – Pirone, pushing Grant down and kneeling on his neck, blocks the line of sight.

A frame from Margarita Carazo's video that shows Tommy Cross Jr. in the foreground, also recording, emphasizes the density of cameras

Go to page 2

a video ends. And because Grant and Agha-Soltan's deaths were each recorded on several cameras – with the footage from each posted and reposted in many forms by many users – Bazin's sacred moment multiplies not just in time but in (virtual) space, as well. That expansion is visualized whenever one finishes watching an Agha-Soltan selection, for example, and is then inundated with suggestions of other videos YouTube thinks may be of further interest, including more material of the same incident.

Iran, Tehran: wounded girl dying in front of camera, Her name was Neda
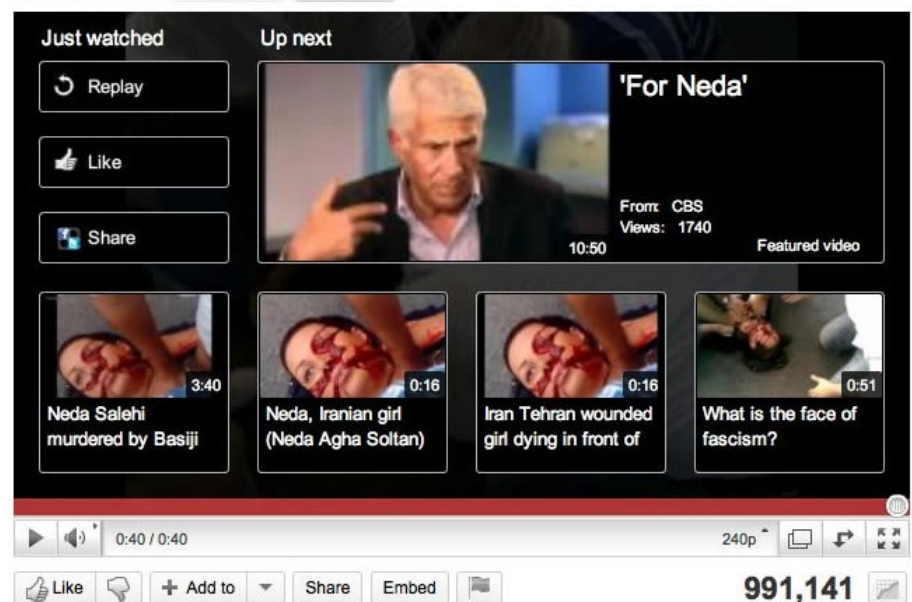
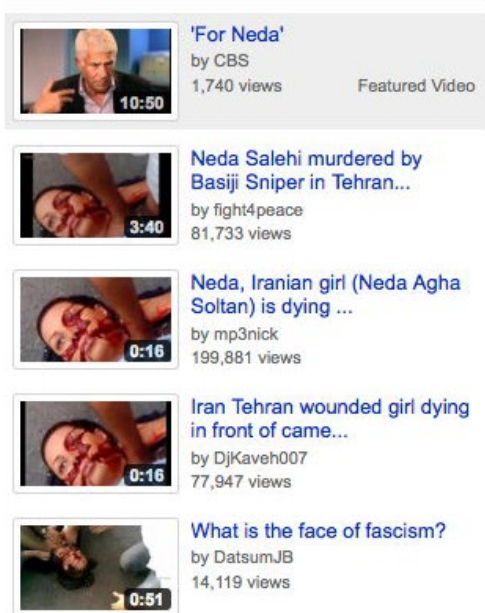Agha-Soltan's death multiplies in space as well as in time on YouTube...


Suggestions

... where finishing a video of her death summons a flurry of suggestions for what to watch next, confronting the viewer with numerous repetitions and variations of her bloodied face.

Thus, if "Replay" does not appeal, one can instead select from the many little thumbnail images of her bleeding face to see other angles or alternate postings of the same video.

The YouTube viewing experience described above seems to invite a certain callousness, and yet the act of watching these streaming videos – likely more than once and from more than one angle – helped fuel political responses and actions by or on behalf of the Green Movement. Theorists such as Dean and Juhasz, quoted above, express justified skepticism about these progressive powers of new media, but it is hard to deny that the Green Movement put social media – especially Twitter and YouTube – to work for large-scale political actions. Within Iran, activists used them to come together in the streets and navigate through government opposition, fully engaging in the "ground-level organization work" and the "planning, discipline, sacrifice, and delay" that Dean sees being phased out by low-investment virtual actions.

Outside Iran, people did take to the streets to demonstrate in solidarity (having learned about the Green Movement online, in many cases), but also used new media tools to spread awareness. In addition, they used these tools to interfere actively with the Iranian government's assault against the protestors. Western

The videos of Agha-Soltan's death established her as a powerful martyr for the Green Movement, helping to continue the protests that had been surging through the streets of Tehran (a June 18th, 2009 instance is pictured here) and fueling supportive demonstrations worldwide.
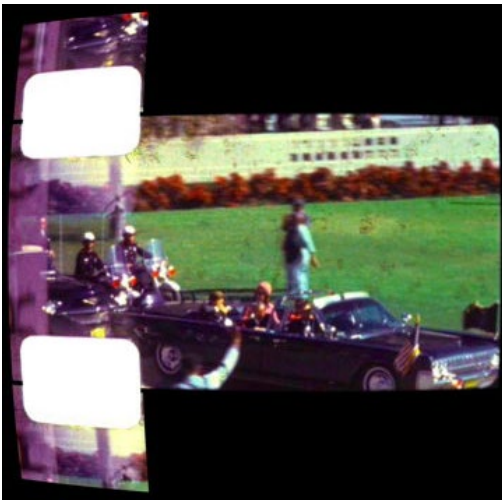
Abraham Zapruder's 8mm film of President Kennedy's death did not air on U.S. television until 1975, 12 years after it he shot it; digital video of Agha-Soltan's death, by contrast, played on YouTube within hours of her death.

Internet users provided proxy servers to keep lines of communication with the protestors open in the face of governments attempts to cut them off. And many on Twitter changed their location and time zone settings to make it seem as if they were in Tehran, making it harder for government agents to find and persecute actual Iranian organizers through Twitter.

That agents were looking for the protestors on Twitter exemplifies the dark side of new media's political potential. As scholars have regularly noted since the 2009 protests in Iran, these media have been wielded by activists against governments *and* by governments against activists, as the powers-that-be adapt and learn the technologies. Stories from Iran in 2009 or varied countries in the Middle East and North Africa in 2011 demonstrate that we must temper excitement about the good new media can do for activists with an awareness of the evil it can do for oppressive regimes.[12] But it is unwise to *disregard* the former in light of the latter – particularly after the Green Movement and the Arab Spring and even actions within U.S. borders in 2011 through pro-union protests in Wisconsin and Occupy Wall Street. Though very different in scope and stakes, these events all demonstrate that activists, not just the governments they protest, have a learning curve with new media. They are still discovering how material and virtual forms of resistance can be mutually supportive and need not be exclusive.

With Grant and Agha-Soltan, digital technology enabled the recording and circulation of deaths that fueled political causes. "Citizen journalists" in both situations were on hand and technologically equipped to document brutal killings that the press did not capture – or could not in Iran because of the ban on non-state media. Digital distribution plays a key role with the Grant and Agha-Soltan videos, as well. Long before it was an option, Abraham Zapruder sold his 8mm footage of President Kennedy's death to Time, Inc., who locked it away in vaults for twelve years before it was shown on U.S. television (illegally).[13] By contrast, footage of Grant and Agha-Soltan streamed online within hours or days of their deaths, much less constrained by the power of governments or news corporations. Both deaths pose dangers to the governments they reflect so poorly on – signifying racial discrimination and police brutality in the United States, and politically repressive violence in Iran.

Yet no government or corporation could shut away a digital video clip in 2009 the way one could an 8mm film in 1963. Such clips can be uploaded to YouTube in minutes, often directly from the phones that recorded them, where they can be played, replayed, and downloaded freely – a system that provides the public with unprecedented access to raw actuality footage. Even in Iran, where the government tried mightily to deprive protesters of the digital communication channels that so aided their cause, such channels proved impossible to fully block. They provide, as journalist Youssef Ibrahim puts it, "a new wrinkle for autocratic regimes experienced at quiet repression."[14]

Amateur footage of newsworthy events, even of death, is a phenomenon with roots deeper than the digital era, as exemplified by Zapruder's 8mm film. His footage of Kennedy – along with other 1960s death images, such as *Saigon Execution* – has a sheen of "I can't believe they caught that on camera." Today, however, the recording of public deaths feels almost inevitable, not only because of the rapid technological advancements that have put more cameras in public space, but because of the social norms that have begun to solidify in the course of those advancements. In situations where violence and death may occur, such as the Green Movement's protests, citizens now tend to be in quick-draw mode with their cameras – always ready to record. This shift is apparent in the bits of death footage that circulated during 2011's Arab Spring, but even more so in those uprisings' iconic meta-images of protestors holding their cell phone cameras aloft and recording en masse. The salient point, these images suggested, was the act of recording itself – a new force of surveillance rising up to challenge the centrally controlled Panopticon (though still subject to exploitation by those in power).

The image record of 2011's Arab Spring (pictured here in an Egyptian demonstration) focused less on what people recorded than on the fact of their recording en masse, as pictures of protestors holding cell phones aloft circulated heavily.

Helped into existence and brought before the public eye via digital technology, the Grant and Agha-Soltan videos propelled some into political action and generally drew tremendous attention to these deaths. For the Agha-Soltan videos, this was attention on a global scale, but the Grant videos traveled beyond U.S. borders significantly less. This disparity is evidenced by the statistics YouTube publicly provides on some videos' circulation. Comparing two of the most popular Grant and Agha-Soltan videos, Grant's receives the vast majority of its views within the United States, also making small inroads in Canada, Australia, and Northern Europe. The Agha-Soltan video garners equal attention in the United States and Iran, but also accumulates more significant view counts in Canada, Australia, and Northern Europe than Grant's and has noticeable visibility in countries such as Brazil, India, South Africa, and Algeria.[15] In fact, though the Grant case was discussed nationally in African American and activist communities, its mainstream media coverage remained mostly regional.[16] Agha-Soltan's death, by comparison, received in-depth coverage by media outlets worldwide.

Following the broadcast of the Grant death videos on YouTube and local news programs, protestors took to the streets in Oakland for several large demonstrations.

At some of the events, participants would lie face-down on the ground with their hands behind their backs, mimicking the nonthreatening pose in which Grant was killed. Photo: Michael Maloney.

While unjust treatment of African Americans by law enforcement is perceived as a commonplace among Oakland residents, the existence of clear video evidence that a white transit cop fatally shot a black passenger lying prone on the ground galvanized locals and brought masses of protesters into the streets on more than one occasion. Indeed, the protests began not in the immediate wake of the shooting itself, but following the broadcast of the Grant videos on YouTube and on local news. While a small number in Oakland participated in looting and destruction, most protested peacefully, calling for justice, brandishing photographs of Grant, and sometimes lying down in the street in bodily mimicry of the nonthreatening position he was in when shot. The racial dynamics of Grant's death, the fact that it was recorded, and the palpable outrage it inspired in a major urban area brought comparisons to the Rodney King case (though King survived his beating by police).

The magnitude of response from the media and the public is, however, not comparable in these two cases. King's became a major national news story and the acquittal of his police assailants prompted massive riots in L.A. on a scale well beyond the protests inspired by Grant's shooting. Grant's supporters closely followed the trial of his killer, Johannes Mehserle, and were generally outraged at the leniency of his conviction and sentencing: two years in prison for involuntary manslaughter, of which he served only 11 months before his June 2011 release on parole. Though Grant's supporters wanted (and deserved) a different outcome, the fact that an officer was convicted of any criminal charge in an on-duty shooting was nearly unprecedented – a result of the political pressure and authoritative evidence the videos helped provide.[17]

Former BART police officer Johannes Mehserle, Grant's shooter, stands trial.

In the Agha-Soltan shooting, Internet broadcast of her death videos made Neda, as she is always called by supporters, an instant rallying point for the Green Movement within Iran and elicited an explosion of sympathetic messages and

gestures from its international allies. Neda's name was yelled on Tehran streets during protests and from residences into the night. She became a fixture of protest signs and a centerpiece of shrines and memorials in Iran and across the globe, as well as a literal "icon" on Twitter. There, supportive users adopted thumbnail photos of her bleeding face as their avatars. Bloggers and posters on YouTube comment boards frequently expressed how deeply the videos shocked and saddened them, adding pleas to spread them and promises to "never forget." One YouTube user seemed to convey the consensus reaction from the West in the simple statement,

> "This is the most terrible thing I have seen in all my sheltered and quiet life."[18]

crisjobcoach RT @margiemiguel "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter." ML King Jr. #iranelection #**Neda**
less than 20 seconds ago from web

barcarocks RT @mehdiassad Revolution in Honor of Neda, the girl murdered by Basij in front of her father today. #IranElection #Revolution #**neda**
half a minute ago from TwitterFon

Nellada RT @SashaHalima: (the girl who was shot) Her name was ندا (#**Neda**), which means 'voice' or call in Farsi #iranelection frm @faramarzhashemi
half a minute ago from web

Free_My_Sheep GOD IS GREAT! #**Neda** is at His side. Neda is Martyred and her name will be forever sacred. #iranelection #gr88 #iran
half a minute ago from web

Twitter users adopted Agha-Soltan's bloodied face as their avatars and made #Neda a trending topic when the videos of her death hit YouTube.

Significantly, the comments on the Agha-Soltan videos contrast with those on Grant's, which emphasize legal and moral debate more than a sharing of grief. Even as the Green Movement sputtered under government pressure in the months that followed, Agha-Soltan still commanded attention. Iranians risked their safety to mourn her publicly, PBS and HBO aired documentaries about her, she was named "Person of the Year" by *The Times* in London, and an Iranian factory was shut down for mass-producing Neda statuettes.[19]


References to Agha-Soltan and her death became a ubiquitous feature of worldwide demonstrations supporting the Green Movement, such as this June 2009 event in Los Angeles.

Participants in this July 25 protest in Paris hold photos of Agha-Soltan in front of their faces.

A memorial to Agha-Soltan in Dubai, which actually features a photo of a different woman, Neda Soltani, who was mistakenly identified as the slain Agha-Soltan through her Facebook profile. When her image was circulated as Agha-Soltan's, Soltani fled Iran for fear of government actions against her merely because of her false association with Agha-Soltan.
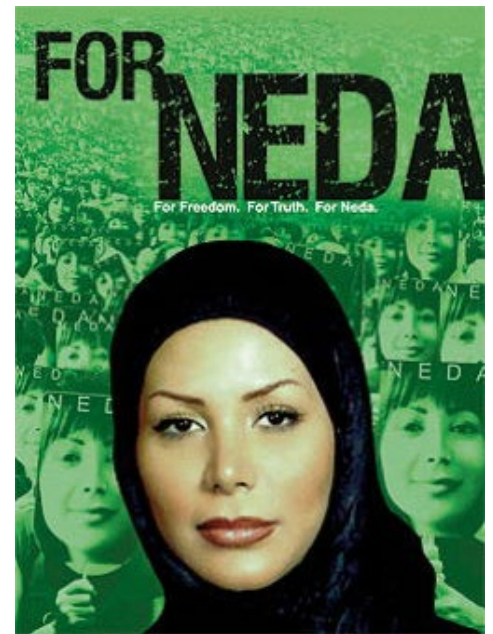
[top] HBO released *For Neda* on their premium cable channel in June 2010, but also streamed it online and aired it on Voice of America to get the film seen widely within Iran.

[left] PBS showed a documentary on Agha-Soltan, *A Death in Tehran*.

How death goes viral: the role of aesthetics in YouTube's "attention economy"

So how did the Agha-Soltan videos from Iran generate such broad interest among the Western public while the Grant videos remained more nationally, and even regionally, bound? Part of the former set's ability to go viral stems from its integration within the larger news story of Iran's election protests and the political factors intertwined with its coverage. In the United States, where relations with Iran are generally hostile, there was a palpable eagerness to support the Green Movement among media outlets and citizens – some of whom framed the movement's purposes in tandem with U.S. efforts to spread "freedom" and "democracy" in the Middle East. I also suspect that the videos achieved so much exposure because many Americans believed they could bear witness to Agha-Soltan's brutal death with few feelings of culpability – unlike videos of suffering and death from Iraq or Afghanistan. Furthermore, the usual impetus to "do something" that accompanies activist videos – sometimes putting off viewers who would rather do nothing without guilt – were, in some analysts' views, mitigated in this case. They feared that too much U.S. intervention in Iran would only strengthen the government's claims that the unrest was a Western plot and not the true reflection of the Iranian people's wishes. Alongside these political dimensions of the videos' popularity, I argue that audiovisual elements played an equally crucial role. Specifically, the ubiquity and versatility of digital video enabled a representation of Agha-Soltan's death that mirrors conventions from the West's mainstream, commercial cinema.

These conventions seep into the raw footage, despite a chaotic recording situation that did not facilitate much aesthetic intentionality. Striking among them are the multiple camera angles, which audiences of Hollywood death scenes have long been treated to, but which have become newly practical for documentary in the digital age when more cameras are likely to be on scene.[20] The difference

Synchronized frames from each of the three cameras that recorded Agha-Soltan's death.

between these angles in fiction film and in the Agha-Soltan videos is that the latter remain raw shots that we watch sequentially rather than simultaneously. It's as if we had full access to three cameras' coverage of a single scene in a fiction film, seeing shots that would later be condensed and intercut.

The most ironic convention that aligns the Agha-Soltan videos with mainstream fiction is shaky, handheld cinematography. Such cinematography was less a stylistic choice than a practical necessity for documentarians in the direct cinema and *cinéma vérité* period when it became a visual trademark of the form. It was a visual style largely prompted by a technological shift, as maneuverable 16mm cameras and synchronized sound equipment allowed for a more spontaneous documentation of events as they happened, without tripods and careful set-ups – a scenario now extended to non-professionals with cell phone cameras, like those who recorded Agha-Soltan's death. But since its documentary heyday in the '60s, intentionally shaky camerawork has overrun fiction film and television, especially in the twenty-first century. Directors use it to overlay a gritty, documentary roughness onto fiction for a more "real," more authentic feeling.

This stylistic adoption is so widespread in fiction that it weakens the link with documentary that the technique is meant to evoke. Where once watching a handheld shot in a fiction film called up associations with documentary, now, I argue, the shakiness of the Agha-Soltan footage calls up associations with fiction film. The unsteady frame that approaches her is very similar to "camera subjectivity" horror films such as *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) or *Cloverfield* (2008), and is only a tad more extreme in its jolts than recent war films. Two separate scenes in *Flags of Our Fathers* (2006), for example, feature a shaky, handheld camera and on-screen soldiers approaching a wounded comrade from approximately the same angle as the Agha-Soltan footage. These lives slip away in front of the camera, like hers, amidst bleeding and suffering and despite medical intervention from desperate witnesses to the deaths.

The Blair Witch Project (in)famously used shaky, handheld cinematography in 1999 to give a documentary feel to footage that is, within the story of the film, supposed to be documentary.

But the technique has spread so rapidly and extensively through fiction films in the ensuing years (such as *Flags of Our Fathers*, pictured here) that its original association with documentary has weakened.

Flags of Our Fathers, in fact, features two deaths of soldiers aesthetically similar to the videos of Agha-Soltan's death. Her death greatly affected Western audiences partly because of its visible/audible adherence to the codes of Hollywood death scenes.

The videos also provide clear close-ups of the streams of blood that pour from Agha-Soltan's mouth and nose – blood flow so dramatic that it would be a challenge for an effects make-up artist to simulate convincingly. Synced to the pace of her escalating bleeding is a crescendo of shouts and wails from the gathering crowd, which audibly register the tragedy, providing the type of immersive soundtrack that makes death scenes more evocative. If we extend our comparison

to casting, Agha-Soltan is a victim ideally suited to command sympathy from an international audience. Like Hollywood's favored murder victims, she exudes the innocence associated with being young and a woman. Her feminine beauty allows for her objectification, too, in the risqué blend of sex and death these films trade in – a viewing mode evidenced by numerous subtly sexual and overtly lewd YouTube comments on her death videos.

Agha-Soltan's Iranian identity also plays a major role, since image distributors and consumers in the West have long proven that they are comfortable watching the bodily destruction of the ethnic other.[21] In particular, the scenario of Americans watching an Iranian woman die at the hands of her own government resonates with the U.S. media's dominant discourse about the Islamic Republic in Iran: that women are the primary victims of its oppressions. More broadly, as Evelyn Azeeza Alsultany has argued, a trope of the Muslim woman victimized by her culture has emerged in post-9/11 U.S. media. While this figure does generate sympathy, in contrast to the figure of the Islamic terrorist, it has most often been deployed to reinforce the claim that America's wars in the Middle East were invested in the "liberation" of Islamic women.[22] Agha-Soltan's death potentially functioned this way for some, affirming U.S. interventions in Iran's neighboring nations as – perversely – feminist acts.

Both news coverage of and public reactions to Agha-Soltan placed great value on her gender, youth, and beauty as primary factors in the sadness of her death.

Multiple angles, dramatic blood flow, immersive audio, and the subject's appearance – these audiovisual details make it easier to understand why the Agha-Soltan videos received such disproportionately massive attention from the international community amidst all the footage coming out of Iran that summer. Even other graphic videos of fatal violence failed to generate anywhere near the amount of exposure for the Green Movement that her death did.[23] Addressing the ways in which mainstream, corporate media aesthetics drive exposure on YouTube, Juhasz quips,

> "Like high school cheerleaders, the popular on YouTube do what we already like, in ways we already know."[24]

Though their attention and intentions must have been focused elsewhere, the makers of the Agha-Soltan videos achieved a familiar and already-popular aesthetic form.

That Agha-Soltan's death looks like a gritty Hollywood war movie is especially important in connecting with U.S. audiences – the dominant users of YouTube – not because they are callous and entertainment-oriented, but because Hollywood has been their primary guide to what death looks like for much of the past century. [25] While previous generations had plenty of first-hand exposure at deathbeds, the twentieth century brought both lower death rates and a rapid medicalization of the dying process that replaced its visibility in the home with sequestering in the hospital. There it was kept mainly out of sight, soothing a society that no longer welcomed familiarity with the physical transition from life to death.[26] Fictional, filmic representations partially assumed the role of exposing people to that process, but with an unsurprising preference for spectacle, favoring the most dynamic and dramatized types of death.

The same appetite for spectacle also dominates YouTube, despite the site's high proportion of actuality footage. YouTube's attention economy is "based on the slogan: pithy, precise, rousing calls to action, or consumption, or action *as* consumption," and here the brief, spectacle-oriented video is king.[27] Its dominance curtails documentarians' options for displaying death's duration, its frequent resistance to spectacular visibility, or its context. Sam Gregory, program director for the activist video organization WITNESS, notes the difficulties human rights videos face in attracting attention on YouTube because

> "much human rights material is not immediately powerful performance, and may not be most effectively or honestly presented in that mode."[28]

Agha-Soltan's recorded death has achieved viral status globally because it *is*

"immediately powerful performance." It embodies the temporally condensed spectacle of YouTube, plus documentary's poignant stamp of authenticity – the alluring promise that one is seeing the taboo sight of "real" death unfolding before the camera.
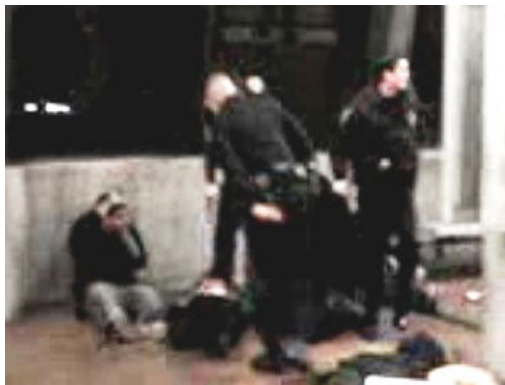

While the dying Agha-Soltan's face and body are displayed clearly in front of the cameras recording her, Grant's remain small in the frame and are usually obscured.

Like President Kennedy before him, Grant receives his fatal bullet on camera, and in both cases – in contrast to the Agha-Soltan footage – we must squint and strain to make out what is happening.

Comparatively, the videos of Oscar Grant have, at best, the look of courtroom evidence, not of a dramatic death scene. Indeed, they were filmed as such by passengers who knew the evidentiary value of their footage. Though more people recorded Grant's death than Agha-Soltan's, the multiple angles offer less to choose from. Several use very similar vantage points, and none secure the close-ups that make the Agha-Soltan videos so striking. Those who recorded Grant's death lacked the proximity and mobility of their Iranian counterparts, because the BART officers had confined them to the train cars. In the bystander videos, Grant himself becomes a small and obscured collection of pixels, reminiscent of (but even less visible than) Kennedy, who died in miniature and awash in 8mm film grain in Zapruder's film. Bay Area news programs underscored the difficulty of seeing Grant's fatal shooting within the videos by adding a familiar annotation when airing them: a bright circle around Grant and Mehserle that tells us where to look for the action.

This aspect of the Grant videos evokes the challenge that documentary death shares with genres and movements as varied as melodrama, pornography, and German expressionism: the necessity of externalizing internal states for the camera. Grant, unlike Agha-Soltan, is a victim whose body does not visibly register the internal damage it sustains. His dose of police brutality affectively fails to project its actual *brutality* in the videos. This failure of the visible is a particular problem because of the extraordinary expectations twenty-first century viewers (and juries) have for video evidence – brought on by the expanding camera coverage of public space and the technological fictions spread by television crime dramas. Investigators on shows like *CSI* and *Law and Order* often manage to obtain clear footage of a crime that helps them crack the case. Even if this footage is initially distant or blurry, they just push a few buttons to sharpen the image or zoom in on a detail – operations that are usually technologically impossible or financially impractical for actual investigations.

The limited proximity and mobility of Grant's recorders aligns their footage more with the distant, fixed positions of surveillance cameras than with the omniscience and omnipotence of the camera in most fiction films. Agha-Soltan's bystanders knew exactly where the action was and what the viewers would want to see, like Hollywood cinematographers. The bystanders recording Grant, however, sometimes lack that awareness because the Oakland shooting played out in a more chaotic way than the one in Tehran. Karina Vargas, for example, disobeys police orders and exits the train to record the arrest better. But as she approaches Grant and Mehserle, she suddenly pans left to catch a young man being tackled right next to her. As she does, Mehserle shoots Grant off-screen and Vargas misses the scene's most important feature. Considering the challenges of her recording task, YouTube viewers are wildly unsympathetic to Vargas. Her turbulent camerawork and inability to enframe the action demonstrate what Juhasz calls the "bad video" aesthetic on YouTube, derided by users for its failure to achieve

> "the conventional norms of quality, particularly in relation to form (lighting, framing, costume, make-up, editing, sound, recording and mixing, performance, etc.)."[29] [open endnotes in new window]

A comment from Pirate48153 typifies the harsh, misogynistic feedback Vargas received:

> "Bitch next time learn how to 2 fukin record b4 u go postin shit up on youtube u stupid hoe."[30]
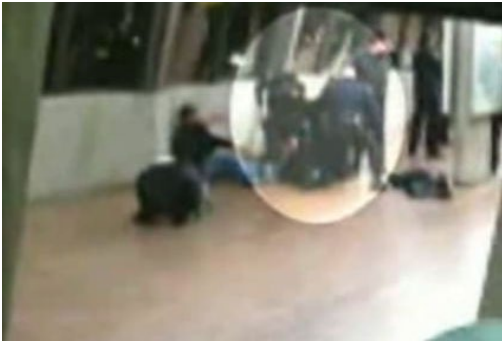
Understanding the difficulty of actually seeing the crime these videos document, Bay Area news networks like KTVU annotated them to highlight the action.

Just before Mehserle shot Grant, the closest camera-bearing witness turned her lens away from the pair and toward another officer who was tackling this man elsewhere on the platform.

Annie's final scene in *Imitation of Life* (1959) typifies the way in which mainstream, fiction films have shown the "moment of death" onscreen: her speech slows and trails off, her expression droops, and her eyes slip into a blank stare.

As this outrage implies, details in the Grant videos like Vargas' ill-timed pan disrupt the fantasy of ocular power that mainstream fiction and the Agha-Soltan videos provide, reading as frustrating moments when the contingencies of documentary interfere with the desire for "maximum visibility."

The audio track is one element that does push the Grant videos' impact beyond that of automated surveillance footage. In concert with the handheld camerawork, which grounds the footage in human subjectivity, the increasingly clamorous passengers give a sense of immersion that partly compensates for the lack of visual detail. Almost never localized to visible individuals, the comments from onlookers gradually blend together as the coherent, collective will of the 2:00 AM crowd. The camera itself, and thus our viewing position, is sonically and symbolically located as a part of this crowd: its shouts are loud and close, while those of the officers sound distant. The videos begin with snippets of conversation unrelated to the still-tame encounter between passengers and police – reminders of the event's apparent banality when it began – like an off-screen passenger saying into his cell phone,

> "Hey, we're in Fruitvale right now. *Fruit*vale, with a fruit! Where you guys at?"

When the BART police push Grant to the ground, though, the crowd's attention becomes audibly fixated. Their remarks grow in volume, frequency, and intensity including:

- "That's fucked up,"
- "Protect and serve, protect and serve,"
- "Fuck the police!"
- "Get their badge numbers," and, perceptively,
- "Put it on YouTube."

Although these words suggest a viewing position allied with Grant rather than the officers, they also reinforce the subtle framing of the footage as most notable for the questions of legality and ethics it raises, not for its tragic loss of life. This dynamic is understandable considering that most of the Grant footage precedes his shooting, while the Agha-Soltan footage follows hers. Also, witnesses reported that many passengers assumed Grant had been tased or otherwise failed to realize he had been fatally shot with a pistol. The protesters surrounding Agha-Soltan when she is felled by a bullet also provide a cacophony of voices, but in a more overtly emotional way. They tell her not to be scared, plead for her to stay with them, or simply scream. For the majority of Western viewers who do not speak Farsi, the audible emotion of the soundtrack becomes even more prominent in the absence of linguistic comprehension.

"I never thought the world could be so small": identifying with the dying

In the details above, a sense begins to emerge of how greatly audiovisual elements shape the emotional reactions and political actions that individual deaths generate in an era when they are recorded and displayed more and more frequently. What's at stake in that shaping process is the extent to which lives are "grievable," as Judith Butler describes. In *Precarious Life*, Butler writes about the way that certain types of death have been ignored or suppressed in public discourse, such as the deaths of gay men during the AIDS crisis, or the victims of U.S. bombings in

Agha-Soltan appears to make eye contact with the camera – to look right at the viewer – as she dies, an element of the videos that many YouTube users wrote about as affecting them powerfully.

Footage of Grant's death does not offer the identification-breeding close-ups and eye contact that the Agha-Soltan footage does. This frame, from footage by Karina Vargas, is the clearest view in any of the videos of Grant's face after he is shot.

Iraq and Afghanistan. While she draws the borders of grievability based on identity and causes of death, the Grant and Agha-Soltan videos demonstrate that aesthetics, too, can contribute powerfully to Butler's uneasy truth that some lives are "so easily humanized" and others are not.[31]

While shot distance and audio play key roles in the relative humanization of the dying Grant and Agha-Soltan, I assert that the primary distinction here is the inclusion of Agha-Soltan's face, in close-up. Intimate facial close-ups are a rarity in documentary death, but a fixture of death in fiction film – a tool for forging sympathy and identification between audience and character. Facial close-ups like Agha-Soltan's seem also to promise the clearest window on the mystical "moment of death" that mainstream, commercial cinema obsessively displays. The archetypal shot is a close-up of the dying character as her or his expression slackens and eyes close or slip into a blank stare. YouTube viewers may perceive that process unfolding in the first Agha-Soltan video, as her eyes seem to meet the camera's stare and then roll back in a loss of consciousness. As evidenced by user comments, the apparent visibility of this dying process provide an emotional charge beyond the power of documentary's more common images of corpses. As Sobchack, quoted above, reminds us: when the cameras roll on the dying rather than the dead, identification is more likely.

The Agha-Soltan videos even offer the illusion of eye contact – a feature of documentary images prized by Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida*. Lamenting his boredom with a recent catastrophe, he writes:

> "Trying to make myself write some sort of commentary on the latest 'emergency' reportage, I tear up my notes as soon as I write them. What – nothing to say about death, suicide, wounds, accidents? No, nothing to say about these photographs in which I see surgeons' gowns, bodies lying on the ground, broken glass, etc. Oh, if only there were a look, a subject's look, if only someone in the photograph were looking at me! For the Photograph has this power . . . of looking me *straight in the eye.*"[32]

Though Barthes then denies its power to fiction film, a look "straight in the eye" is within the repertoire of documentary, and Agha-Soltan's death provides a striking instance. Many posters to YouTube's comment boards wrote about this detail and the haunting experience of Agha-Soltan's look as she dies.

Between Oscar Grant and the cameras that record his death, there is no eye contact, nor even many clear shots of his face. The videos portray a victim who is decidedly not "faced," who often becomes a flat representative of a demographic group ("young black men") – hence the extreme ubiquity of Grant's face in the protests, used by supporters to individuate and humanize him. Renderings of his face – uniformly based on one smiling photograph of him that local papers ran in the case's aftermath – appeared as posters, at public memorials, on protest signs, on t-shirts, as masks worn by demonstrators, and even as large-scale murals.

More so than Agha-Soltan's, Grant's face became an extremely visible feature of demonstrations and of public space in Oakland in the wake of his death. The face that appears over and over again here works to humanize Grant in a way that the YouTube videos cannot, with their long shots and blocked lines of sight that hide Grant's face.

In Oakland, there was a localized outpouring of grief for Grant, but if public response to the Grant and Agha-Soltan videos generally frames the latter's death as more widely, globally "grievable," it is also because a broad swath of viewers were able to *identify* with Agha-Soltan as they watched her breathe her last breaths. The political actions that arose from both deaths bear this out in their different deployments of "I am Neda" and "I am Oscar Grant" declarations. "I am _____" is a somewhat common template for activists whose actions center on an individual. It is also a template that deserves closer examination for its bold (and usually uncritical) declaration of not just support for that individual but direct identification with her or him.

Grant supporters in Oakland shouted this slogan at marches, spray-painted it around the city, and inscribed it on protest signs. The individuals declaring this shared identity were largely (though not exclusively) those who indeed shared with Grant all or most of the identity attributes that were seen as crucial to his death: being a person of color, male, young. San Francisco filmmaker Kevin Epps, for example, explained at a protest,

> "I'm angry because [Grant] could have been me . . . We're guilty until proven innocent."[33]

The "I am Oscar Grant" declarations demonstrate one way in which a shared vulnerability to violence can be, as Butler claims, a unifying force – a force she posits as crucial in this post-9/11 world. She writes,

> "From where might a principle emerge by which we vow to protect others from the kinds of violence we have suffered, if not from an apprehension of a common human vulnerability? I do not mean to deny that vulnerability is differentiated, that it is allocated differently across the globe."[34]

In its culturally specific deployment among young African American men, "I am Oscar Grant" evokes that uneven allocation of vulnerability.
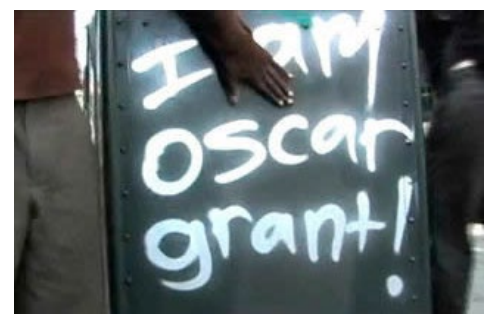
Grant's supporters used the declaration "I am Oscar Grant" heavily, shouting it at demonstrations, writing it on their protest signs, printing it on t-shirts, and spray-painting it around Oakland.

The parallel "I am Neda" declarations seem to follow Butler's principle, too, but ultimately elide her clarification that vulnerability is "allocated differently across the globe." Unlike the mainly Bay Area based "I am Oscar Grant" statements, which remained situated in a specific social and political context, annunciations of "I am Neda" again achieved global reach. In addition to the phrase's appearance in international protests, it was also used to generate personal photos and messages online in solidarity with Agha-Soltan. Amnesty International launched one such campaign called "Neda Speaks," for which 1,901 users sent in photos.[35]

A sample of the almost 2,000 user-uploaded photos at Amnesty International's "Neda Speaks" website, with each participant declaring "I am Neda."

The site's explanation of the campaign grounds its use of the phrase in the local and culturally specific, explaining,

> "People in Iran yell 'I am Neda' into the street after lights out as a sign of defiance since the government has made it illegal to mourn for her. We want you to join us in support of this fundamental stand for human rights by uploading a photo of yourself holding a sign that says 'I am Neda.'"

What is not explained is *why* that powerful phrase should be exported out of its local and specific context – why the declaration of identification "I am Neda" is the best way to make "this fundamental stand for human rights." Nevertheless, 1,798 people of diverse ages, genders, ethnicities, and nationalities have posted pictures of themselves with "I am Neda" scrawled on pieces of paper they hold or on visible body parts or clothing. As earnest and well-meaning as these individuals seem,

many of them evoke Jodi Dean's disappointed digital-age principle,

"React and forward, but don't by any means think."[36]

While African American Bay Area resident Kevin Epps can say "I am Oscar Grant" because "[Grant] could have been me," there is little credibility in the idea that many of the "I am Neda" declarers would feel like "Neda could have been me." These supporters are able to identify with the woman dying so dramatically in intimate close-up and looking them "straight in the eye," but their sharing of human vulnerability lacks nuance.

Their good intentions are dampened by the missing acknowledgment that vulnerability is "allocated differently across the globe" – that a white teenage boy from Connecticut, for example, will very likely avoid being shot by his government or dying by any violent means. One example that is both moving and fraught comes from another, smaller-scale "I am Neda" photo project started by a Tumblr user who "wanted to make a point that Neda became the face of the uprising because we could all see ourselves in her."[37]

A soldier serving in Iraq submits an "I am Neda" photo to the Tumblr blog of that title.

Responding to that user's call for photos of people wearing homemade "I am Neda" apparel, a U.S. soldier serving in Iraq posted a photo of himself in full military gear, holding open his unbuttoned camouflage shirt to reveal those words, inscribed in marker on his t-shirt. However earnestly and emotionally this soldier writes about the Agha-Soltan death in his accompanying text, there remains a certain incongruity between the words on his shirt and his visibly signified participation in the U.S. war in neighboring Iraq – a lingering gap between the capacity to sympathize and the right to claim a shared identity.[38] Perhaps the U.S. song "Neda" – recorded by the band The Airborne Toxic Event for Amnesty International's "Neda Speaks" campaign – best express the power *and* naiveté embodied in "I am Neda." Collapsing space in a familiar cliché and eschewing the spirit of Butler's assertion that vulnerability is "allocated differently across the globe," the song's repeating chorus about how Agha-Soltan's death affects the songwriter ends with the deliberately pronounced words, "I never thought the world could be so small."

Agha-Soltan's look at the camera is transformed into a Flash animation for The Airborne Toxic Event's "Neda" music video, made to benefit Amnesty International.

The promise and peril of context

The image of Agha-Soltan's bloodied face, taken from one of the videos and deployed by Green Movement supporters ...

The qualities of the Agha-Soltan videos that enable this broad, even strained, "I am Neda" identification – their universalizing communication of suffering and death, encapsulated in short, dramatic, and aesthetically familiar clips – are the same qualities that exclude cultural specificity. While useful for drawing attention to an activist cause, such videos reduce complex events to spectacle and strip away cultural and political context – a characteristic of YouTube that worries scholars and activists.[39] [open endnotes in new window] This problem is especially prevalent in raw footage distributed online, where it can be re- or de-contextualized when taken from its original site and embedded elsewhere, and where it is often accompanied by uninformed and even misleading user comments. As described above, a lack of context troubles YouTube's administrators, as well, forming one of the criteria under which they may remove graphic videos from the site. Even as the Agha-Soltan videos reveal conditions in Iran during the protests, they also exclude aspects of Iranian culture and history enmeshed with this murder. Most importantly, the raw footage itself cannot explain the context of martyrdom's resonance for Islam and for Iran.

... for international protests (pictured here in Athens and Berlin).

Distinct from looser applications in the West, martyrdom in Islam is more codified, and the title can be officially bestowed or denied by legal and religious authorities. At the core, an Islamic martyr, or *shaheed*, is one whose death creates a powerful testimony to his or her faith.[40] Martyrdom has been a truly formative concept for Iran, specifically, because its population is predominantly Shi'ite – a sect of Islam for which the martyr Hussein is a key figure – and because the 1980s Iran-Iraq War forged countless martyrs who were revered by Khomeini and the government.[41] The concept and history of Islamic martyrdom in Iran provided a frame through which many there discussed or interpreted Agha-Soltan's death – a set of common cultural reference points familiar to even the secular elements of the Green Movement, whose conception of her martyrdom would not be a religious one.

Understanding the danger that Agha-Soltan's martyrdom could (and did) fuel the Green Movement, the government launched a long and multifaceted campaign to either co-opt or defuse its power, trying everything from claiming her as a martyr *for* the state to alleging that she was alive and living in Greece.[42] Accommodating both the complex narrative conventions of Islamic martyrdom in Iran *and* a simpler "innocent victim" story in the West, the Agha-Soltan videos again demonstrate their global appeal. Her Iranian family and supporters integrated the tropes of Islamic martyrdom into descriptions of her death: pure intentions, fearlessness, a premonition of her death, and a holy corpse that remains beautiful.[43] In Agha-Soltan's look at the camera, some even saw a variant of a final exhortation – an Islamic martyr's effort to impart truth to the living with her or his final words.[44]

These qualities were generally ignored in the Western media's coverage of Agha-Soltan, and in some cases the values associated with Islamic martyrdom were inadvertently undermined. One such value crucial to the function of martyrdom's *recording* is that graphic representations of martyrs' deaths

Both CNN and Fox News blurred Agha-Soltan's face in initial airings of her death videos ...

... dulling her potential power as a martyr and ignoring the cultural context of martyrdom in Iran.

cannot be lumped in with the so-called "gratuitous" violence in Western media that inspires so much hand wringing. Numerous comments online attacked the Agha-Soltan videos as insensitive and violent, but as historian David Cook notes in *Martyrdom in Islam*,

> "In the end martyrdom is *about* blood and suffering."[45]

Blood, suffering, and death are essential components of martyrdom and its representation – components that give the act such emotional and persuasive power. The Green Movement and its worldwide supporters understood that immediately, making images of Agha-Soltan's bloodied face a ubiquitous feature of their protests. Yet these components were suppressed in initial airings of the videos on major U.S. news networks. Rachel Maddow on MSNBC played only a small portion of one video, cutting it just before Agha-Soltan began to bleed from her mouth and nose, and accompanied even this snippet with profuse warnings and justifications.[46] CNN and Fox News both blurred out her whole face – a common practice in U.S. television journalism intended to show respect for the victim and family. These channels reversed the digital annotation KTVU put on the Oscar Grant videos, adding a circle that denies access to one portion of the frame rather than a circle that calls attention to one. In doing so, they erased Agha-Soltan's identity, her bleeding and suffering, her charged look at the camera, and the emotional power of the video in general. To suppress Agha-Soltan's identity and the violence of her death in this manner is to neutralize a martyr's most powerful means of bearing witness, converting non-believers, bolstering the faithful, and honoring the dead.

In these examples of how news networks integrated the Agha-Soltan videos, an uncomfortable insight becomes apparent: calls for simply *more* context and attacks on YouTube's lack of context fail to recognize the abuses contextualization can inflict upon footage. Here, the bare encounter with raw footage in the supposedly non-contextualized space of YouTube can provide a clearer and more illuminating engagement with recorded death. I argue that the Grant footage presents another instance of the dual promises and perils of context. Part of the reason that his shooting quickly inspired such passionate protest in Oakland was that the widely-accessible videos of his death seemed to be plainly legible, with no further context required. That is, an African American man lying face down with his hands behind his back and posing no threat to anyone is shot at close range by a white officer. As police procedure consultant Mark Harrison elegantly put it,

> "If they were kids from [the wealthy suburb] Orinda being rowdy on the way home from a Raiders game, I don't think it would have gone down the same way."[47]

In the videos was visible evidence of extreme white-on-black police brutality, the sort that many Oakland residents have felt besieged by for decades.

As the saga of Mehserle's criminal case got underway, however, his supporters and the press heaped on additional context, details YouTube did not offer that – these sources implied – were necessary to interpreting the videos correctly. For example, the *San Francisco Chronicle* printed diagrams of how officers' Taser holsters attach to their belts, the process for changing the holster's configuration, its position on Mehserle's belt, and how that
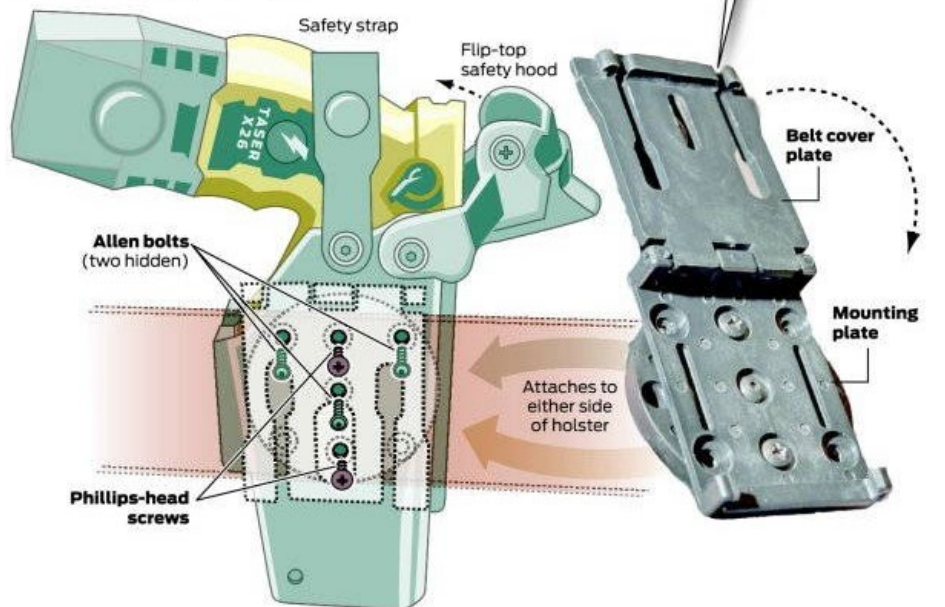
position could have confused him about whether he was pulling his gun or his Taser.[48]

Adjustable Taser holster

Police officers choose to draw Tasers either right- or left-handed. Prior to Jan. 1, 2009, BART officers were expected to select a holster and adjust it to their preferred draw motion before their shift.

An adjustment required moving the holster's belt clip from one side to the other, taking up to 15 minutes, using a Phillips-head screwdriver and Allen wrench.

Belt clip

Three Allen bolts attach the belt clip's mounting plate to either side of the holster.

Two Phillips-head screws let the officers adjust the angle of the holster to their preferred reach.

BART police-issued Taser

Safety strap

Flip-top safety hood

TASER X26

Belt cover plate

Allen bolts (two hidden)

Mounting plate

Attaches to either side of holster

Phillips-head screws

Sources: Chronicle research, BART police

John Blanchard / The Chronicle

The San Francisco Chronicle presented this diagram of BART officers' Taser holsters as a key piece of contextual information necessary to understanding Grant's shooting.

Most disturbingly, the news media opposed Mehserle's squeaky clean record as a BART officer to Grant's five prior arrests, attempting to justify Mehserle's readiness to use force, even though he was not aware of Grant's record during the arrest. But the aggressive inclusion of these facts in the news did send a different message loud and clear, one already legible in the way that Grant died: that this young, African American man with a police record was not living a "grievable life" by U.S. cultural standards. By contrast, every piece of personal information about Agha-Soltan that the media promoted seemed to bolster her grievability in the West: her university education, close ties with her family and fiancé, love of travel outside Iran, ambition to be a singer, and oft-asserted love of freedom rather than politics (as if dying in protest of a fraudulent election could somehow make sense as an apolitical act).

Here we might recall a parallel process of dubious contextualization that occurred in the Rodney King case – the case with which Grant's is so often associated. Bystander George Holliday's camcorder footage of King's beating became key evidence in the trial of LAPD officers. Unable to ignore this seemingly damning video, the defense instead presented it to the court in a way that "distorted and dehistoricized" the beating, as Elizabeth Alexander argues:

Rodney King's 1991 beating by the LAPD was an oft-cited precursor to the Grant case, though the videotape of King generated much more public interest than the footage of Grant.

"The lawyers . . . slowed down the famous videotape so that it no longer existed in 'real time' but rather in a slow dance of stylized movement that could as easily be read as self-defense or as a threat. The slowed-down tape recorded neither the sound of falling blows nor the screams from King and the witnesses."[49]

Such a presentation of Holliday's video works toward several advantageous effects for the officers: anesthetizing jurors to the shock of the beating by playing the footage many times, dulling its horror by eliminating the audio, and creating time within the short video for lawyers to expansively narrate it. In doing so, they added their own favored context, arguing for why the situation justified each blow or kick King suffered on-screen. The videos of Grant's death played many times in Mehserle's trial. They sometimes provided visible evidence for the prosecution to counter inaccurate witness testimonies, but – like the King videos – were also subjected to a series of slow motion and freeze frame replays narrated by experts testifying for the defense. In this case, too, the supposedly inadequate context of YouTube becomes preferable to the videos' more contextualized displays in court.

Of course, warnings from activists and academics about a lack of context on YouTube must also contend with the form of context YouTube videos *do*, in every case, provide: the comments of viewers. In the case of the Grant videos, YouTube comments offered a context far more important to understanding Grant's death than the details of Mehserle's Taser holster. The comments contain elaborate, brutal, and persistent articulations of racism against African Americans, a context too raw and ugly to be fully printed in the paper or aired on the local news, but that YouTube can display. Overtly racist comments filled with derogatory terms and offensive opinions appear often, from many users, on many different postings of the Grant videos. Their presence and quantity provide an important reminder about one aspect of activism on YouTube: that high view counts measure only visibility, not political alignment. The x-million viewers a video attracts do not translate to x-million supporters of its apparent cause.

On a broader level, the racist comments illustrate the way in which YouTube and social media sites are havens for hatred at the same time that they are progressive tools, muddying the image of the Internet as a democratizing, utopic force. As Jason Sperb notes,

"The Internet may be the most efficient textual universe for any scholar wishing to prove that racism is alive and well today, and much more rampant than many will admit."[50]

Though not the site's intention, YouTube creates a public forum where racists can connect, with videos that depict graphic violence against people of color becoming nodal points for such gathering. They solidify shared attitudes in a manner similar to the lynching photographs of a previous generation that circulated among racist whites in the United States. Although racist comments on the Grant videos were usually decried by many other viewers posting on the boards, they expose a cultural context for his shooting that does not match the claims about post-racial America elicited by Barack Obama's inauguration in the very month that Grant was killed, January 2009.

Conclusion: "to rescue some type of meaning"

When Brian Steidle returned from Darfur to the U.S. with his binders full of corpse photographs in *The Devil Came on Horseback*, he naively hoped those

photographs would make an immediate, concrete, and large-scale impact, leading to U.S. military intervention in Darfur. Earlier in the film, he had longed for an act of transformation: for the camera through which he watched trucks of Janjaweed killers to become a weapon's scope, for what he saw as passive observation to become active intervention. A related act of transformation underlies his fantasy about the photographs, as the dead bodies he preserves in page after page of documentation promise to summon troops who will rise up in their stead and save those who can still be saved. Those troops do not come, but Steidle's disappointment ignores the smaller-scale responses his efforts must have generated: a few hundred or thousand minds changed about the situation in Darfur, donations to aid groups and human rights organizations, more citizens drawn to rallies and protests on the issues, and maybe even a politician or two inspired to advocate for Darfur.

In the activist use of documentary death, we hope – as Steidle does – to see clear victories, but are inevitably left with partial successes that require too many qualifiers. Agha-Soltan's recorded martyrdom empowered Green Movement protesters in Iran and shed light on their plight for global audiences, but it did not lead to a new election or a government overthrow. Successes feel even more scant in relation to the Grant videos: Mehserle was convicted, but on a light charge with a short sentence. Further, the narrow media focus on his trial and his individual culpability drew attention away from the structural inequities of law enforcement in the United States and the flawed policies and attitudes in the BART police force that precipitated this tragedy.

In fact, rather than take a hard look at their own tendencies toward racial profiling or their use of force guidelines, several Bay Area law enforcement agencies considered other policy changes in the wake of Grant's shooting that indicated they had learned a disappointing lesson from the case: get control of the documentary images. Some in the region introduced over-the-ear or chest-mounted cameras to record point-of-view shots of what the officers wearing them see. Though such a system could help make officers accountable in their use of force, that is not the tone with which the police are framing it. San Jose's Sgt. Ronnie Lopez, for example, explains:

> "We live in a YouTube society where people have the ability to record us. We firmly believe officers do the right things for the right reasons, and this is a way to show *our side*" [my emphasis]. [51]

In terms of lasting change brought about by the Grant case, there seemed to be little talk of rooting out racial profiling or revising use of force guidelines in Bay Area police departments, but – tellingly – some did adopt auto-recording cameras for officers to wear. "This is a way to show our side," remarked San Jose's Sgt. Ronnie Lopez.

In this aftermath, it is painfully clear that the technological wonders of new media still have very limited power against systematic racism, that their intervention can only go so far in securing justice for lives that are still not grievable in our country.

In addition to qualifying the successes of the Grant and Agha-Soltan videos, I must also note that for the great majority of individuals shown dying on YouTube, no organized political response will emerge to "do something" about their deaths. No users will even make the easy promise to "never forget." These videos will fall into "the vast sea of little-seen YouTube videos" that Juhasz calls NicheTube.[52] When I stumble upon one of those seldom-viewed deaths on YouTube, I recall David Cook's powerful insight,

> "Ultimately, martyrdom is an attempt to rescue some type of meaning and dignity from death."[53]

A similar attempt is made by those who produced and circulated the Neda Agha-Soltan and Oscar Grant videos, and by most documentary

representations of death, whether of martyrs or not. The act of watching an actual death cries out for justification, some reassurance that it has not merely provided a momentary diversion – just another YouTube offering viewed in between music videos and cute kittens. We want these images to *communicate* something clear and vital, to effect some change in ourselves and in our world. The Grant and Agha-Soltan videos did so more than most. But they – like all documentary records of lives ending in front of cameras – remain difficult to absorb, perched precariously at the edge of representation.

Go to Notes page

To top   Print version   JC 54   *Jump Cut* home

Notes

1. Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003), 13. [return to page 1]

2. Vivian Sobchack, "Inscribing Ethical Space: Ten Propositions on Death, Representation, and Documentary," in *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 237.

3. Daniel C. Hallin, *The Uncensored War: The Media and Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 110.

4. Jodi Dean, *Blog Theory: Feedback and Capture in the Circuits of Drive* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), 110, 125.

5. Alexandra Juhasz, *Learning from YouTube* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011), http://vectors.usc.edu/projects/learningfromyoutube/texteo.php?composite=14

6. "Community Guidelines," *YouTube*, accessed March 19, 2011, http://www.youtube.com/t/community_guidelines

7. For a synchronization of footage from all six cameras, see: "Captured by 6 different cameras BART police shoot and kill unarmed Oscar Grant," YouTube video, 9:39, posted by "streetgangs," July 4, 2010, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rSN5WF9qD3g

8. "Iran, Tehran: wounded girl dying in front of camera, Her name was Neda," YouTube video, 0:40, posted by "FEELTHELIGHT," June 20, 2009, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bbdEf0QRsLM;
"Shot By Basij [WARNING GRUESOME]," YouTube video, 0:15, posted by "bowlofudon," June 20, 2009, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fmi-LePl894 [return to page 2]

9. Brian Stelter and Brad Stone, "Web Pries Lid of Iranian Censorship," *The New York Times*, June 22, 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/23/world/middleeast/23censor.html?ref=neda_agha_soltan

11. André Bazin, "Death Every Afternoon," in *Rites of Realism: Essays on Corporeal Cinema*, ed. Ivone Margulies, trans. Mark A. Cohen (Durham: Duke University Press, 1958/2003), 27-31.

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weekinreview/30shane.html?hp

13. David R. Wrone, *The Zapruder Film: Reframing JFK's Assassination* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2003), 70.

14. Philip Seib, "New Media and Prospects for Democratization," in *New Media and the New Middle East*, ed. Philip Seib (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 4.

15. These statistics accompany the following videos, and are consistent with those of other Grant and Agha-Sotltan videos: "POLICE SHOOTING AT BART STATION – OSCAR GRANT," YouTube video, 3:28, from an episode of *KTVU Morning News* televised by KTVU on January 5, 2009, posted by "TheDirtyNews," January 5, 2009,
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bmJukcFzEX4;
"Neda Agha Soltan, killed 20.06.2009, Presidential Election Protest, Tehran, IRAN," YouTube video, 2:23, posted by "AliJahanii," June 22, 2009.

16. *The New York Times*, for example, did not report on the Grant shooting until more than a week after it occurred, when large protests began in Oakland.

17. Statistics on criminal charges brought against officers demonstrate how unusual Mehserle's case was. See Demian Bulwa, "Ex-BART Cop Accused of Murder in Rare Group," *The San Francisco Chronicle*, February 15, 2009,
http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/
c/a/2009/02/15/MN2615QD01.DTL

18. Comment from Sepirothkai ["Iran, Tehran: wounded girl"].

19. PBS aired *A Death in Tehran* as part of its *Frontline* series in November 2009 and HBO aired *For Neda* in June 2010; William Yong, "Iran Halts Production of 'Neda' Figures," *The New York Times*, June 9, 2010,
http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/10/
world/middleeast/10neda.html

20. The 1968 coverage of Lém's execution is a notable pre-digital precursor. It was captured on film by NBC cameraman Vo Suu and as a photograph by Eddie Adams. For more on Hollywood's presentation of death from multiple angles, see Amy Rust, "'Passionate Detachment': Technologies of Vision and Violence in American Cinema, 1967-1974" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2010), 22-42.

21. See John Taylor, "Foreign Bodies," *Body Horror: Photojournalism, Catastrophe, and War* (New York: NYU Press, 1998), 129-156.

22. Evelyn Azeeza Alsultany, Contribution to the Roundtable "Keyword Searches: 9/11 Plus Ten" (presented at the annual meeting for the American Studies Association, Baltimore, MD, October 20-23, 2011). I am also grateful to Nazanin Shahrokni for giving me similar insights in commenting on a draft

of this work.

23. One example showing a male protester dying from a shot to the neck has only 749 views and 7 comments, as of April 8, 2012 ["protester shot in neck in Iran, GRAPHIC MATERIAL DISCRETION IS ADVISED PLEASE DO NOT REMOVE," YouTube video, 0:43, posted by "CensorshipIsBad," June 17, 2009,
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eGsMfO03q_8]

24. Juhasz,
http://vectors.usc.edu/projects/learningfrom
youtube/texteo.php?composite=83

25. Jean Burgess and Joshua Green describe YouTube as a site that is, "U.S.-dominated demographically to an extent; but...feels culturally U.S.-dominated out of all proportion" [Jean Burgess and Joshua Green, *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2009), 82].

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youtube/texteo.php?composite=78

28. Henry Jenkins, "From Rodney King to Burma: An Interview with Witness's Sam Gregory," *Confessions of an Aca-Fan: The Official Weblog of Henry Jenkins*, April 2, 2008,
http://www.henryjenkins.org/2008/04/from
_rodney_king_to_burma_an_i_1.html

29. Juhasz,
http://vectors.usc.edu/projects/
learningfromyoutube/glossary.php
Juhasz associates "bad video" mostly with talking head vblogs, but notes that "using bad form on other genres of video can limit the effectiveness of your message"
[http://vectors.usc.edu/projects/
learningfromyoutube/texteo.php?composite=75]. [return to page 3]

30. Comment on "Cop shoots & Kill unarmed Man(Oscar Grant)," YouTube video, 3:59, posted by "bofoleone," January 6, 2009,
http://www.youtube.com/watch?
v=jFNDK8PQGNw

31. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), 37.

32. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 111.

33. Lesley Fulbright and Steve Rubenstein, "BART Protesters in SF: 'We Are

Oscar Grant!'" *The San Francisco Chronicle*, January 13, 2009, http://articles.sfgate.com/2009-01-13/bay-area/ 17198450_1_police-vans-protesters-powell-street-bart

34. Butler, 30-31.

35. http://nedaspeaks.org; photo count as of April 11, 2012.

36. Dean, 3.

37. "I am Neda," *Tumblr*, July 17, 2009, http://iamneda.tumblr.com/

38. The soldier writes: " . . . even in the military there are those of us that see what is happening in the world, and we are also appalled. i'm only one country away from iran, and there's still so little i can do. for what it's worth, i hope this helps, somehow" [http://iamneda.tumblr.com/post/143617709/i-hope -its-not-too-late-i-am-a-soldier-in-the-us].

39. Sam Gregory, for example, notes that, "most human rights situations are embedded in contexts of structural complexity, long histories of repression and reaction and many actors with different agendas" [Jenkins]. [return to page 4]

40. David Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 154-155; Joyce M. Davis, *Martyrs: Innocence, Vengeance, and Despair in the Middle East* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 9.

41. Roxanne Varzi, *Warring Souls: Youth, Media, and Martyrdom in Post-Revolution Iran* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 47; Cook, 4; Davis, 46.

42. Journalist Scott Peterson speculates, "Part of the strategy like that, certainly for the Islamic Republic, would be to just cast so much doubt, to really just cloud the issue so much, … [that] all of it would be meant to somehow undermine the power of the story of Neda's death" ["Interview: Scott Peterson," *Frontline*, September 9, 2009, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/ tehranbureau/deathintehran/interviews/peterson.html].

43. These tropes are described by Cook, 116-134.

44. Examples of Iranians reading Agha-Soltan's death through the codes of Islamic martyrdom abound in HBO's *For Neda* – a documentary that scarcely mentions the word "martyr," let alone explains its cultural context, but includes interviewees who weave together a forceful, subtextual martyrology more accessible to viewers steeped in Islamic culture [*For Neda*, directed by Anthony Thomas, aired June 14, 2010].

45. Cook, 4.

46. "Iranian Protests, Neda, Moussavi and more—Rachel Maddow," YouTube

video, 9:34, from an episode of *The Rachel Maddow Show* televised by MSNBC on June 22, 2009, posted by "CheneyWatch1," June 28, 2009, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JRfwhYTHCcI

47. Leslie Fulbright, "Many See Race as Central to BART Killing," *The San Francisco Chronicle*, January 11, 2009, http://www.sfgate.com/default/article/Many-see-race-as-central-to-BART-killing-3177256.php

49. Elizabeth Alexander, "'Can You be BLACK and Look at This?': Reading the Rodney King Video(s)," in *The Black Public Sphere: A Public Culture Book*, ed. Black Public Sphere Collective (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 84, 96.

50. Jason Sperb, "Reassuring Convergence: Online Fandom, Race, and Disney's Notorious *Song of the South*," *Cinema Journal* 49, no. 4 (2010): 28.

51. Demian Bulwa, "Many Police Use Cameras to Record Interactions," *The San Francisco Chronicle*, July 27, 2010, http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2010/07/27/MNGI1EID8S.DTL

52. Juhasz, http://vectors.usc.edu/projects/learningfromyoutube/glossary.php

53. Cook, 11.

Images from *Budrus*

Ayed Morrar, leader of the Budrus non-violent protest, talks to villagers.

The graveyard of Budrus lies in the path of the fence.

Animated maps. The 'green line' and in red, the Separation Barrier.

- Julia Bacha's *Budrus* (Palestine)
- Ali Samadi Ahadi's *The Green Wave* (Iran)
- Leonard Retel Helmrich's *Position Among the Stars* (Indonesia)

Transnational collaborations for art and impact in new documentary cinema

by Daniel Miller

Have non-violent resolutions to conflict between Israel and Palestine actually worked? What terrible things happened to young people in Iran's "Green Wave" revolution? How do families in Indonesia, still between rural life and the globalized economies of Jakarta, deal with i-Phone-loving teenagers like ours?

One might think that long form documentary feature films would find it increasingly difficult in this hyperspeed journalistic present to produce in depth real stories on topics like these, ones that matter. But in fact, as a professor of documentary film in a School of Journalism, I see my students learn about issues that matter, that are radically *news* to them through such recent documentaries. Furthermore, in the face of severe economic pressures on funders, communities of support are coming together to improve the financing of documentary filmmakers.[1][open endnotes in new window]

I hope in a modest way to show in this paper that the traditional genres of documentary film live on in new forms and for important purposes. They not only reach student, festival and art house audiences worldwide, but they have a greater outreach and many share an ambition to effect change. I am taking as examples three films that screened in 2010 at one of the world's largest film festivals, the International Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA), where I first saw them. In their various ways, all three represent the promise that documentary films coming from all over the world and—importantly—going on to screenings all over the world might have a considerable impact on worldwide opinion. And they potentially can have a big effect on the future of media practice as well as education.

Among the films I saw were three that stood out: Julia Bacha's *Budrus,* about the 2004 ten-month non-violent protest movement in the Palestinian village of Budrus; [2] Ali Samadi Ahadi's *The Green Wave,* about the 2009 Iranian election protests;[3] and Leonard Helmrich and Hetty Retel Helmrich's *Position Among the Stars,* the most recent film in their trilogy about three generations of an Indonesian family facing globalization.[4] Despite the fact that all three of these films appeared at IDFA, they have differing methods of production and distribution, which may affect the kinds of impact they can have. In fact, testifying to the importance of the documentary festival circuit, all three were invited to around fifty film festivals in their first year, giving them exposure not only to audiences but also access to film

Ayed's mother in the olives.

The first non-violent confrontation.

Olive trees destroyed for the fence.

Iltezam Morrar, Ayed's daughter, looking at video of the protest in horror.

communities in cities from Berlin and London and Mumbai to small towns such as Bend, Oregon and Bil'in, Palestine.[5]

These films in particular share the following attributes. They

- employ and address issues of new personal digital video recording technologies and new social media practices;
- tell dramatic and provocative stories about compelling and empathetic characters—including strong women characters in particular;
- address social, civil, and human rights issues in a local community, as they touch individuals;
- are conversant with and informed by both historical practices and principles of non-fiction cinema arts and at the same time by new, innovative and even revolutionary practices;
- are all products of "transnational" social communities working to support films and advocate for civil and human rights. Here I am borrowing a term used by historian Jay Winter in his insightful book, *Dreams of Peace and Freedom,* describing new transnational communities more connected by concerns for civil and human rights than concerns for national sovereignty.[6]

The first two films—Julia Bacha's *Budrus* and Ali Samadi Ahadi's *The Green Wave*— use images, sounds, and words gathered through new media technologies and new social media platforms by citizen witnesses and participants in the events.[7] The third, Leonard Retel-Helmrich's and Hetty Naijken's (Retel-Helmrich's) *Position Among the Stars,* uses new small handheld hi-definition cameras with advanced auto-features, in conjunction with Leonard's hand made, "steady-wing" mounting devices, to facilitate his "single shot cinema" moving camera, direct cinema/ verité technique. Characteristically, his camera moves in orbits around his subjects, easily following movement high and low in long uninterrupted "single shot" scenes.[8] Helmrich gives workshops in his innovative equipment and practice; for example, he was at Harvard for a term and is going to teach at New York University.

All three films powerfully document both individual human stories and broader social issues and events across national boundaries. They do so "transnationally," using border-crossing collaborations. Nonetheless, above all, the new documentary is still like the old in that it tells stories that communicate human experience. Summing up the need for this quality, at a festival panel on documentary film funding proposal criteria, a group of some of the most influential funders agreed that above all they were looking for dramatic and compelling stories with strong and empathetic characters. Even funders mandated specifically to fund social civil and human rights issue films such as Orlando Bagwell, Director of the Ford Foundation, agreed that story and character came first. As Judith Helfand, co-founder of Chicken and Egg Pictures, also on the panel put it,

> "When we were children, our mothers did not tell us bedtime reports, they told us bedtime stories."[9]

Budrus

Budrus focuses on the story of the ten month non-violent protest movement in Budrus, Palestine against the building of a partition for the Israeli Security fence there and the wholesale destruction of ancient olive groves, grave yards, buildings, roads and even school yards it required. To tell the story, director Julia Bacha, who heard about the demolitions several years after the fact, had to reconstruct rather than film events directly, but she was determined that her representation of this recent history should read as authentic and immediate. She began by searching for footage taken by citizen participants in the movement. Social media had in fact kept that community connected and accessible. She discovered hundreds of people who

Iltezam asks why there are no women in the protest.

had participated in the protest movement and who had recorded footage during it. She contacted them and sent out widespread requests for photos and video they might have captured. The results were astonishing. She eventually received hundreds of hours of personally recorded images and sounds documenting the Israeli destruction and enforcement efforts. More important, she could use this material to give eye witness accounts, with accompanying video, of the village's ten month nonviolent protest movement and the family discussions, meetings, marches, confrontations, conferences, battles and stand-offs.

As the movement grew to include not only Budrus citizen activists, but also Palestinians from other areas, Israeli peace activists, South Africans, South Americans, and participants from other many other nations—truly a transnational movement—it attracted news coverage as well. Eventually archival b-roll shot directly by these participants and witnesses during the actual events, some contemporary b-roll footage and sit-down interviews, and archival news images comprised the film and the content of the story.

The story of Budrus is propelled by father and daughter Ayed and Iltezam Morrar. Ayed emerges as a new kind of leader. After years spent away from his family in prison, he proposes a non-violent struggle against the injustice of this state-imposed fence and accompanying violence. Iltezam defies tradition herself at the age of sixteen, joining the protests with her father's consent and becoming an important spokesperson and leader of the Budrus movement. Her example encourages hundreds of other women to join the protests.

The men can't push the trucks, "but the girls can do it."

The border police attack the women protestors.

Iltezam jumps in the bulldozer's hole where it is digging.

All the women join Iltezam and the bulldozer turns around.

In one of her critical moments on film, Iltezam, risking injury or death, defiantly stands in front of an Israeli bulldozer that is uprooting and destroying ancient olive groves. She has brought with her a small group of other women who join her in front of the bulldozers. Someone there with a video camera captures the event. The traditional-looking women are led by Iltezam, wearing the *hibab,* their heads covered, with long skirts, but scrambling over the rocks to confront bulldozers and armed Israelis face to face. They transform the violent confrontation of Israeli men and Palestinian men and boys into a different kind of conflict. The men cannot stand up to the Israeli trucks, but, as she says, "the girls can."

Later the women are filmed going to the rescue of Israeli mathematician and peace

Yazmina, Israeli border police, wanted a role that was tough, she said in her later interview.

activist Kobi Snitz, who is being beaten by Israeli forces. He has organized Israeli activists to come to Budrus and join the cause. When he refuses to stand down from his protest against Israeli Defense Forces, they react violently, isolating, pummeling and attempting to arrest him and drag him away. In one of the most remarkable moments I have seen on film, in video captured by one of the citizen cameras, Palestinian women run across the open ground to his aid and astonishingly expose themselves to beatings and reprisals in order to try to free him. Iltezam says in the film that she could not believe that Israelis would ever risk their lives for Palestinians as he did. Likewise I am sure that Kobi was amazed that Iltezam and other Palestinian women would risk their lives for an Israeli. Their perceptions of the world and their possibilities for the future were transformed by the events in Budrus they witnessed and participated in.

Kobi Snitz, Israeli mathematician and activist, is arrested—he says he thought he was going to die.

The Palestinian women go to defend Israeli peace activist, Kobi Snitz. He says he "got stronger from their determination."

Iltezam says that they did this knowing little about efforts to fight against the wall:

> "The Wall and the resistance against it were marginalized in the media." [11]

Perhaps the perceptions of audiences witnessing what she experienced would similarly undergo a kind of transformation—at least in some small way. The way that politics in Israel and Palestine are difficult, local, seldom unified at a national level, means also that a story such as *Budrus* must be local, must come from among the people. Although dignitaries and politicians at the national level such as Salam Fayyad, Palestinian Prime Minister, visit the Budrus protests, Morrar says:

> "My relationship with these officials is necessary but very touchy. I don't like it. You know their importance, but they don't feel your importance or value. They think the whole world is a tent and they control the tent. And everyone must play by their rules. We are living under occupation, you cannot lead society while sitting in your office. You have to be among the people to lead them."

As a younger activist, Morrar missed his children's childhood while he was in prison for six years.

Ammad Awwad, a Palestinian high school teacher and Hamas member, tells Bacha in an interview that he was shocked to see Israelis standing hand in hand with Palestinians and risking their lives in solidarity with them. He says that witnessing this changed him and his attitude toward Israelis and the means by which Palestinians could fight injustice. He says that in Budrus non-violence was the only way, as any violence would only give an excuse to the Israeli government to rationalize and engage in total war on the Budrus protest. Seeing him, a Hamas member, participating in this non-violent protest hand in hand with Israelis and women, within the leadership and leadership of Ayed Morrar, who is not a member

Ayed addresses a Budrus Hamas rally promoting non-violence. Ayed says he is "the most ardent critic of the ideology of Hamas. However they are an authentic part of Palestinian society."

of Hamas, defies stereotype and reveals humanity—as does the Israeli mathematician and peace activist Kobi Snitz, who joins the Budrus protest because he feels that the Israeli Peace Movement's efforts are ineffective and that the direct action of non-violent resistance taking place in Budrus offers another way. Thus in 2003, this was a remarkable coming together of father, daughter, men, women, militant Hamas member and non-violent Morrar, Palestinian and Israeli. And the images that made up the film came largely from among the people as well, those who were there.

Ahmed Awwad, local teacher, and a member of Hamas who embraces non-violence in Budrus.

Awwad and his family. "Unity is the only way to achieve victory."

Over the course of ten months, thousands of people, including Palestinians, Israelis, a delegation from South Africa, and from many other nations came and participated in the Budrus movement. Their efforts achieved the unthinkable, changing the course and the policy of the Israeli Government through non-violent means. The Israeli fence was moved back from Budrus, toward the green zone along the border.

As a scholar of and former participant in the U.S. Civil Rights movement and the nonviolent protests of the Vietnam era, I cannot tell you how moved I was by seeing that the images of the largest Budrus protests looked so much like those of the U.S. and South African Civil Rights movements—and that in Budrus they achieved similar results—in part because of the visibility made possible through journalists, citizens and participants filming them. The Israeli news coverage helped to change Israeli policy and to save Budrus' olive groves. However, it was not sufficient to make the world notice that non-violent protest had worked in Palestine. Gaining more attention for that amazing news in itself is part of the activist work of *Budrus*.

Member of the Israeli border police, Yazmina, from an interview shot, speaking to Julia Bacha.

This film helps demonstrate a potential future strategy for documentary. Footage collected by small affordable recording devices in the hands of people participating directly in events, citizens if you will, can be formed by a documentarist into a unified, compelling and important story that transcends the individual media itself. *Budrus* is a high-quality film that its audiences receive not as raw news or social media, but as cinematically powerful. "Transmedia" practices can do more than inform audiences—it can transform them—or at least their embedded attitudes. The events at Budrus happened several years ago; the non-violent victory there was six years past when the film came out in 2010; and participants as well as news organizations in Arab countries and Israel have been filming important events for a decade. So the significance of this film now lies in its finding more audiences, interesting major journalists, gaining screenings to audiences in Europe, the United States, Australia, and South America as well as in Israel and Palestine. The film needs as well to have a pedagogical use, since its story could convey practical as well as inspiring examples to organizations and groups working for non-violent solutions

to conflict and it could serve as a prompt for fund-raising and discussion.

The movement grows and gains international support and recognition—the marches might remind us of the U.S. civil rights movement.

Iltezam, becoming a strong woman and a leader of her people.

In Budrus an Israel soldier holds a young boy under his arm while he shoots live ammunition.

Protestors tear down the fence.

Israelis defending Palestinians from Israeli soldiers who are escalating violence.

Reviews of the film caused a reconsideration of history. When the film came out in 2010—and not when the events occurred in 2003—the story of Budrus was now covered by major news organizations all over the world, and not just as a film event. Stories appeared in *The New York Times, The Economist, The Nation, Newsweek,* and on PBS's "Charlie Rose" show and *MSNBC*'s "Andrea Mitchell Reports," for example, and in over 170 other newspapers, magazines, and television outlets.[12] Kristof notes in particular the compelling effect of the women in the protest:

> "Israeli security forces knew how to deal with bombers but were flummoxed by peaceful Palestinian women. Even when beaten and fired on with rubber bullets, the women persevered."[13]

Most of us, including most of the participants at Budrus, perhaps have believed that the Palestinian/Israeli conflict would not yield to nonviolent resolutions. *Budrus* demonstrates that it can. But before the screening of the film and subsequent reviews, the event had passed without this kind of notice.

In addition to the artistic merit of the film, it has succeeded in reaching widespread audiences by a distribution plan that addresses both the influential but politically diverse audiences of major film festivals and theatrical screenings in major cities and the activist organizations and potential recruits working to advance non-violent approaches to conflicts, from Amnesty International and Human Rights work sponsored by the United Nations to the women's groups of Israel and Palestine.[14] For example, Queen Noor first introduced the film at a Gala screening in Dubai. Her ongoing support is based on the belief that non-violent protest is invisible in today's news, so she has used her celebrity to help promote attention—for example, appearing on the Charlie Rose show about *Budrus* together with Julia Bacha.

People of Budrus celebrate after the Israeli government announcement that, after 55 demonstrations, the government has decided to move the Separation Barrier.

Palestinian Ayed Morrar and Israeli Kobi Snitz look over the olive trees.

Julia Bacha and Ronit Avni belong to an organization, Just Vision, whose aim is to use high-quality films and added educational materials produced about them to promote peaceful conflict resolution in Israel and Palestine.[15] *Budrus* started as a major entry on the festival circuit, had a certain success in art theater distribution, and has now established itself online and in screenings to serve as an educational and organizational resource in considerable demand for its lessons on organizing peaceful protest (do include women) and its message of possible success. Just Vision encourages the audience for *Budrus* with a host of resources available from the web site, and also in the form of speakers they will provide.

Although the film might well be counted as a great success, however, the campaign for peaceful resolution to conflict in Israel and Palestine continues to be so difficult that even legal victories such as the one at Budrus may not resolve issues—even laws successfully passed may not be carried out.[16]

Go to page 2

To top   Print version   JC 54   *Jump Cut* home

Images from *The Green Wave*

Man and woman holding a poster: "The people had learnt to talk to each other again."

Green symbols are everywhere.

The Green Wave

Civil and human rights struggle in another Muslim country, Iran, is the subject of the second film we discuss here, Ali Samadi Ahadi's *The Green Wave*. This film about the contested June 2009 national elections in Iran shows the massive wave of popular non-violent demonstrations in support of reform and protests against government repression that the world witnessed in 2009 and that resonated in the similar protests in other Arab countries during the Arab Spring of 2011. These events were fueled by an unprecedented social media explosion of witnessing, reporting, and documenting that reached millions throughout the world and inaugurated a new age of activist transnational communication. In Iran, however, the reprisals came swiftly and the end of "The Green Wave" is tragic.

The "Green Wave" and the new media and social media implications had their own contradictions. First came a popular political movement that believed it would elect Mir-Hossein Mousavi as the next president. Then after the election, with the disappointment at losing the election to Ahmadinejad and the conviction that fraud had changed the results, the Green Wave became a protest movement. The Green Wave movement did not have the kind of success the Budrus protests did. Instead, it resulted in a counter-wave of horrific state-sanctioned violence, violations of civil and human rights in Iran that aimed to suppress the protest against rigged elections with wide-spread imprisonment, rape, torture, and murder—and a well-organized effort to hide the extent of this violence.

The film exists to tell the rest of the world about these violent acts against human rights so they are not forgotten, even though the government of Iran has succeeded in stopping most internal debate and in punishing those who would take the news outside Iran. Iranian-born German director Ali Samadi Ahadi and others who made this film are now part of a global Iranian community of expatriates and refugees, and the film is in fact one of several Iranian films recently released that defy efforts at silencing Iranian filmmakers.

Since access to Iran and to the election events have been closed off, Ali Samadi Ahadi—like Julia Bacha— has had to make the story after the fact and discover innovative means to do so. Under pressure to reveal fully the brutality associated with the election in Iran, with news of what happened subject to censorship, and with punishment of eyewitnesses within Iran who could testify in an identifiable way, he and his team embarked on a concentrated effort to gather all the recorded sounds, images, and stories they possibly could from citizens who recorded them at the time of the events.[17] [open endnotes in new window]

Ahadi had access to a new source of recorded interpretations of the event that Julia Bacha, who was retrieving material created during the events in Budrus in 2003-4, did not. This resource came from the enormous, unprecedented number of blogs, vlogs, tweets and social media posts recorded and exchanged during the Green Wave events. Iran's young people are one of the most active blogging and social media populations in the world. After combing through tens of thousands of blog entries, Ali and his team selected, collated, and condensed the most compelling into individual narratives. They also discovered on these sites and from other sources dramatic real time images and sound recordings of the immediate events to use in the film. Twitter quotations roll across the screen during the film.

In order to make the best use of extensive non-visual (blogs, twitters) or visually

problematic material (from phone cameras), the filmmakers decided to use animation, a traditional genre in Iranian culture, as a primary documentary story-telling form.[18] The film uses these drawings not only in alternation but also together with real filmed images, including interviews, creating a hybrid form of considerable emotional and aesthetic power.

Slide show: *Metamorphosis*. Keveh speaks the worries about the election from a blog: the sequence is an example of animation metamorphosis as the ballot is cast like a leaf into the sea and ends up like the fish at the foot of a boot, stranded on dry land.

The documentary centers around two reality-based fictional characters—Azedeh and Keveh—whose stories and words, performed by young Iranian actors in exile, Pegah Ferydoni and Navíd Akhavan , were taken verbatim from the real blogs written at the time. The art director, Ali Reza Darvish, made images of the characters. He is a serious artist with a reputation in the world of books and art as

well as film, and the effect of his drawings is itself a major asset of the film.[19] The animators for these stories, Sina Mostafawy and Ali Soozandeh, used an animated panel technique contemporary and accessible to young people, like graphic novels or comics in motion. They combined these animated scenes with intense sound tracks and an emotional score that dramatized the reality and immediacy of the scenes.

In the filmmakers' endeavor to tell this story within a context of the human rights discussions that would reach and impact an audience, they also incorporated sit-down interviews with older human rights scholars and writers. The gravity and authority of this testimony serves to reinforce the animated sequences that represent the real time experiences of the young on the streets of Tehran.[20] And the younger people interviewed—Mehdi Mohseni, Mitra Khalatbari, and Babak, an activist who is only filmed in silhouette—support the authenticity of *The Green Wave's* most compelling story. It is primarily the young who blogged, photographed and participated in the events of the Green Wave during May, June and July 2009 in Tehran, who employed social media to spread the word and build the movement, who translated their hope for a better future into a movement, and who produced, directed, and animated the film. And it is primarily the young—and the main characters documented in the film—who have suffered the beatings, rapes, tortures, imprisonments, and murders that the film reveals.

Dr. Shirin Ebadi, Lawyer and Novel Peace Prize winner, says the election was surely fraudulent.

There are helmeted troops in the street.

Keveh looks out the window at them. The drawing shows his reaction to the sight of troops.

I was surprised at the way Ahadi strikingly combined real-life with animated footage in many of the animated frames. Animated shots of characters looking out windows, for instance—describing terrible events they are witnessing on the streets—include real footage of those very events reflected on the animated surface of the windows. Eyeline match cuts to the real recorded footage of the events then take place. While the real recorded footage lends an aspect of verité testimony to the film, the animation dramatizes the story visually. Most importantly, the animation technique allows the filmmakers to document the stories communicated in the blogs that would have otherwise been invisible to audiences, and to make the characters' experiences central. While making over 50% of a documentary with animation challenges the traditional genre, it also inserts a new form of eyewitness account with the written blogs and tweets, so the cartoon illustration doesn't seem fictional.

The Green Wave's citizen-based, new media accounts of the events are combined with citizen-witnessed and recorded video images, animated images, and sit down interviews filmed in Europe afterward into a remarkably innovative, near-seamless flow. And through these innovative combinations of old and new techniques the film narrates the spirited cameraderie, work, and hope for reform preceding the elections, the courage and resolve of the protest, and the horror of the street, prison, and torture chamber violence that followed, perpetrated by Iranian authorities and sanctioned by the state. A generation of Iranian young people, especially students, suffered this trauma, and the human rights violations against protesters conveyed by *The Green Wave* have created a generation of Iranians in search of justice.

After Ahmadinijad is declared the winner, crowds want to know "Where is my vote?"

Ali Khameini condemns protestors at the Friday sermon, speaking under Ayatollah Khomeini's portrait. He supports Ahmadinejad and says the protestors are the ones responsible for what happens to them.

The pro-Ahmadinejad crowds shout, "God is great."

A scene about the balloting that begins at the Polling Place is at the heart of this story about democratic hope and despair. Those who have been interviewed in person after leaving Iran narrate over scenes of the voting:

> Mehdi Mohseni: "That day I went to the southernmost part of the city and made my way north, checking out all the places. I voted at Hafte-Tir Square. I can confirm that I didn't see any Ahmadinejad supporters."

> Mitra Khalatbari: "Back then, many people thought that the elections could not be manipulated if voter turnout exceeded a certain percentage."

When the activist Babak and others hear everyone around them cheering for Mousavi and see no one who supports Ahmadinejad, they are sure they have won. But the main animated character, Keveh, says (and this of course cites what someone wrote in a blog):

> "I'm concerned about the excitement, the outcry, the illogical color green, the nightly marches of protest, the green mascara and people's green-dyed hair, about the commotion that numbs your senses, the excessive rush to wash away the irrationality of the last four years, about my fellow citizens uninformedly spreading this irrationality. I am concerned about the disappointment after all this excitement. Our history has shown that behind such destructive waves there always lies an endless desert. Suddenly the happily marching sneakers feet can turn into garrison boots marching in step. That scares me. It has happened before, and can happen again."

As he speaks, a series of images appear illustrating the metamorphosis of the vote into something that flies up in the wind on a dry land where dying fish are all around.

After the election results are announced and Ahmadinejad has won, people think there was fraud. While the Green Wave participants represent a range of people both generationally and in education (and importantly, female and male), some commentators on the election have said that rural, uneducated people supported by the right wing, generally more fundamentalist, had been courted by Ahmadinejad with generous social programs. Mousavi's near unanimous popularity among students who blogged was not representative of those Iranians. But the young keep repeating, "Where is this place, where no one ever thinks of us?"

There is little question that there was widespread voting fraud. Nobel prize-winner Dr. Shirin Ebadi says in the film interview, "It was revealed that in 50 towns and cities there were more ballot papers cast than inhabitants living in those places." Where there were a variety of parties and supporters, moderate candidates who would be expected to get part of the votes received <u>no</u> votes at all, zero.[21] However, the question of the film is not, finally, about election fraud; it is about the continuing horror of violence against protests, against the young, and the enactment of violent punishment against families as well as against those who speak out.

One has to look no further than the Friday night sermons throughout the country, principally as attended and as broadcast to the nation from Tehran and delivered by Khameini, to see the demonstrated power of the conservative religious/political leadership. Importantly, we should also note the make-up of those attending the

Friday night sermons in person.

Showing this, the film documents a pivotal event in the Green Wave revolution—the June 19 Friday night sermon and speech by Supreme Leader Khameini to the crowd and the nation. "I had hoped that in his speech Mr. Khameini would resolve the matter fairly," says campaign activist Babak. When Khameini appears, instead of seeking a conciliatory process, he sides with Ahmadinejad and blames the protesters:

> "The president's opinions are the closest to mine. It is a fallacy to believe that they can exert pressure on the state with demonstrations and can force those in power to yield. No! That is wrong. Whether they like it or not, they are the ones responsible for the bloodshed and brutality."

The crowd gathered there is both spontaneous and enhanced by the importation and encouragement of fundamentalist supporters of Ahmadinejad. The film dramatically portrays the crowd cheering and chanting in response:

> "God is mighty, Khameini is our leader. Death to the opponents of the supreme leader."

After this, believers are licensed to carry out whatever punishment they wish against the infidel protesters. They are told that God will forgive them for torture, murder, or any other sin, under the logic that those being punished are responsible before God for their own deaths. Many witness the military-like Basiji's violence against protesters, but the religious view sanctioned by Khameini says they are responsible for their own suffering.

In his film interview, Mohsen Kadivar, Shiite cleric, said about Ali Khameini's support of Ahmadinejad,

> "With the patronage of this liar, he turned against his people. It would have been his duty as the father of the nation to pour oil on troubled waters, but not to take sides."

After Ali Khameni's statement, in an animated scene inside an apartment, there is a white rose on the window sill in the night. Azedeh, the animated female character, is speaking as the camera pushes out to look at the lighted city in the darkness. She says, in an eloquent lament, taken from an actual blog:

> "Today is Friday, June 19. Tomorrow is Saturday, [pan across the city, loud noises], tomorrow is the day of our destiny. Tonight the cries 'God is great' are louder than ever." (Again, words taken from blogs) "Where is this place where every door is closed? Where is this place in which the blood of young people is shed and later prayed on? Where is this place in which the citizens are referred to as criminals and riffraff? Where is this place? ... This place is home to you and me. This place is Iran."

In her interview, Mitra says,

> "So the expectations were that nobody would go out. Maybe they thought if Khameini made a speech like that, they would intimidate the people. They would go back in their houses and not come out. Exactly the opposite happened."

Mehdi Mohseni says in his interview,

> "We are the people. We are not riffraff. We are the people and you can't ignore us. And the people paid a high price for this." [We hear screams as the motorcycles drive down the crowds.]

The artist portrays the overwhelming sense of bloody violence everywhere.

Note the integration of the later interviews with film of the real events and then a scene of animation.

And immediately after Mehdi speaks, the film cuts to another cell phone camera video shot of an impossibly crowded street scene on that Saturday following Khamenei's speech—with the people flowing like a river toward the camera and chaotically fleeing in panic-stricken fear away from the militias racing toward them —and the citizen camera in the middle of the crowd on motorcycles. Each motorcycle has a driver and a heavily armed militia or military police officer mounted on the back, beating and shooting at people. This is some of the most frightening violent conflict footage we have ever seen, and the pixilated moving camera, poor-quality video contributes directly to that feeling of being there and being in peril.

The men on motorcycles drive into the crowds and beat people up brutally.

A young boy who had just purchased some yoghurt is killed.

Azedeh, a nurse, says the ID cards of injured and dead protestors in the hospital are taken.

Bodies from the hospital are thrown in trucks and driven away. It will be hard to know how many are killed.

During this sequence an ominous single bass piano note bangs down hard in the soundtrack and vibrates on among the sounds of the crowd's screams and shouts. Animated motorcycles are moving at high speed directly toward the simulated camera. The scene cuts to a boy on the street and there are three split-second reaction shots as he turns towards the oncoming policemen and reacts in shock and fear. The scene cuts to his hand and the yoghurt tub he holds as he lets it go and it drops and then a quick cut to his terrified face and his hand coming up to protect himself. The simulated camera quick zooms into an extreme close up of his terrified eyes. Then we see a reaction shot of one of the women in green as she witnesses the moment of his death and gasps in horror as her hand flashes across her face. As this animation goes on it is accompanied by Mitra's interview testimony about the event.

One might argue at this point and others that the collage and alternation of animation and on-screen testimony might weaken or undercut the scene's power. I do not agree. Mitra's on-screen testimony is so stunning, moving, visceral and verité that it empowers rather than diminishes the scene as it plays out before me. As her hands clasp in front of her heart and then reach out while she tells this story, and her face exhibits the same type of shock the animated woman in green exhibits in the film, I believe her, and the truth of the scene.

Scenes of bloody, unfocused violence flash across the scene and then we see a message print out on the screen and hear the sound of a twitter message being typed out on a phone and a cell phone signature "end of message" ringing sound after each line, and we see an innovative texting on screen that emulates the texting of someone tweeting a message.

> Twitter messages
> June 20th

- Eyewitness: "Young protester killed with bullet through the head on Navab street.10:32 am"
- Fatemiyeh Hospital Tehran: "30-40 dead as of 11 pm; 200 injured. Police taking names of incoming injured. 11:59 pm."
- "R.I.P. Neda. Our thoughts and prayers are with her family tonight. 10:20 AM"
- "Europeans, call your embassies, ask them to ask Doctors Without Borders into the embassies; make field hospitals! 11:36 PM"

The widespread attacks by the paramilitary group, the Basij Resistance Force, led by Hossein Taeb, had been endorsed by Khameini himself, so to speak, and the motorcycles driving into the crowd that are shown in the film, and the beating and murder of innocents, also shown, were tolerated and supported by counter-revolutionary crowds shouting "God is Great" who believed they were commiting no sin in the eyes of Allah.[22] After the speech, as nurse Azedeh says, hospitals "are filled to the brink." The Basij took away identity cards, collected the bodies, and loaded them on trucks.

Keveh is taken to prison.
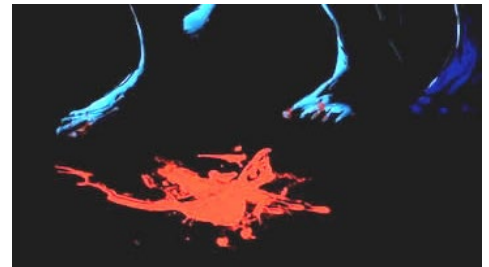
Some in his cell are killed in the dark.

The hospitals are overwhelmed with the injured.
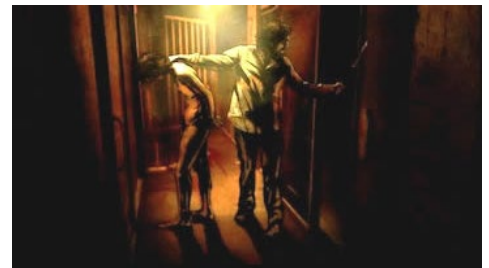
Booted men of violence enter Azedeh's apartment and take her to prison too.

Three young men in an alley ...

... are beaten to death.

The personal stories are told in animated images of reality-based characters

Azedeh and Keveh along with the images and stories of recorded real life counterparts Mitra Khalatbari and Mehdi Mohseni and others interviewed later. All of these stories combine to use the power of film to tell a personal/national story that seems compellingly believable.

Slide show: Keveh is taken from the dark prison in a truck out into the sunlit, dry desert, where he is dumped and left, naked and alone — like a fish out of water, repeating the theme of the ballots poured into the water and ending up blowing along the sand. He will have the evidence of the scar on his arm to remind him of the whole prison experience.

But is this film more than a passionate witness—and in fact, what audiences has it reached, and how might it actually bring change to Iran? Sukhdev Sandhu writing in *The Guardian* asserts the possible significance of film for later movements:

> "Because the Arab spring was a revolution spread (if not created) by digital media such as mobile phones, Twitter and amateur video, it could be argued that more Muslims than ever before now associate political freedom with the moving image – rather than the printed word."[23]

In 2011, its first full year of distribution, *The Green Wave* appeared to European viewers on Arte television, and it was screened widely at film festivals—some 51 of them. The claim that this film might have influenced the "Arab Spring" is credible. [24]

How else might this film change society? It is possible that events that occurred in 2009 may impact U.S. audiences as the film is screened in the United States in 2012. People here could understand more vividly how close the Iranians came to a more moderate leadership with a more democratic society, and even more importantly, perhaps, how the Ahmedinijad government in Iran has been involved

Mehdi in his interview puts his hands over his eyes.

Tehran at night.

in election fraud, human rights abuses, and especially in generating the brutal suppression of women and young people who supported the Green Wave "revolution."

The Green Wave and *Budrus* share with the third film I will discuss, *Position Among the Stars,* this eye toward women as well as youth, generational change, and the resonant stories of struggle and dignity. All three films turn on a close-up revelation of the remarkable communities that emerge and the inventiveness and courage of individuals.

While this third film does not include sit-down interviews, citizen-produced new media, or animation, it does portray issues and events as they are reflected in the individual lives of a family. It also shares an extraordinary dedication and sacrifice to the love of a new documentary film art, in this case the "single shot" filming with special equipment that reveals and touches history through the careful observation of ordinary human events. *Position Among the Stars* completes a trilogy about a lower-middle class Indonesian family directed, produced and written by Leonard Retel-Helmrich and his sister Hetty Retel-Helmrich Naijkens between 1996 and 2010. This film documents the lives of the Shamsjuddin family between 2007-2009.

[Go to page 3](#)

Position Among the Stars

A worker spraying insecticide is framed among the dewdrops in the rice field.

In the beginning the story is about a family in a transnational crisis. Here are the words that open *Position Among the Stars,* appearing in white text over a black field of what appears to be stars:

> "One Family
> Three Generations
> Facing a Global Economy."

Stars begin to move right to left. Sounds arise of insects and sprinkler and then of a hand pump sprayer. Fade up from black on to a scene in which a left to right moving camera reveals green rice shoots in the foreground and horizon of palm trees in the background. The stars are revealed to be dew and sprinkler drops on the rice shoots.

As the camera continues slowly moving right, a man wearing an Indonesian rice paddy hat moves across the field, applying insecticide spray from his back-mounted spray reservoir. He is beautifully shot and framed, moving from left to right across the middle ground of the scene exactly at the upper 3/5 horizontal axis of the shot. As he moves he is variously reframed in the shot between the bejeweled backlit green rice shoots in the foreground that are large enough in the foreground of the frame to contain, connect and almost embrace him within both their rootedness to the natural earth and source of their growth, and their reach to the sky that they both point to and seek sunlight and energy from. The framing also effectively freezes the moments of his manual and mechanical labor. The near balletic movements of his free arm moving overhead with the pump handle and the pulling it down are cinematically and thematically captured.

Workers hang from the electrical towers leading to Jakarta.

A spider in the opening montage. The film is full of small animals shot as carefully within a single shot as the main characters.

The dragonfly in the opening montage.

The ladybugs resemble dewdrops.

The labor of the rural working class in Indonesia and its interconnection to the land

and the sky is simply and beautifully celebrated at the same time that the stars are revealed to be dewdrops. Some of the drops are frosted with insecticide. Irony laces the pastoral, but the coexistence of and contradictions between natural beauty, human labor, and modern chemicals reside in this image held carefully in balance for our attention by the artful filming. Artistic technique itself is a fourth element in the composition.

The next shot is a cut to an extreme close up of a spider in the field glowing in the backlight of the rising sun and firmly connected to and placed within its own web of glistening water droplet stars. The camera follows the spider up its web toward the sky, glowing ever more greatly as it rises closer to the sun. Then there is a cut to a dragon fly flying left to right across the sky and then with an advance cue of the sound of metal moving there is a wide shot again of the countryside, focusing on two tiny silhouetted humans perched on the more severe and calculated geometries of a rising transmission tower backgrounded by completed ones extending into the distance. It is a gesture toward what we later discover to be the far-off metropolis of Jakarta that is extending its technological reach to the homes of these rural farmers throughout the nation. This establishes one of the film's major themes: the intrusion of global technologies and economies into the heart of our characters' traditional rural homes and lives. The camera pushes in on the precariously perched workers and then there is a cut to an extreme close up of two ladybugs perched on seed laden green rice shoots. Their weight and movement creates a spring and rhythm in the rice shoots.

Rumidjah and Tumisah sing a childhood song about the dewdrops in the country. The camera circles them.

In Tumisah's bamboo house, a repurposed electric light burns. This image demonstrates Helmrich's great sensitivity to symbolic comparisons within single shot compositions. The light bulb repurposed for use in a village without electricity also demonstrates the dignity and inventiveness and practicality of the rural people.

Rumidjah and her son, Bakti, take a motorbike/rail vehicle to catch the train, riding backwards and framed by the mountain and the Indonesian landscape. This shot has been used frequently in reviews of the film.

At this point we begin to hear, in a lovely sound advance and sound and image juxtaposition, the voice of a woman singing, and as the ladybugs take off from the rice shoots we hear the song lyrics: "*Little dew star, don't become too big,"* And cut to the smiling medium close up of the woman singing on a dirt road in the country —"*In the dry and rainy season.*"

She turns in the shot to the woman following her and embraces her, bringing her forward with one arm encouraging her to join in the song. *"You keep the rice paddies wet."*

Here the director and cinematographer exercise the first orbiting steadywing shots of the film as he moves from right to left around the first woman to the second woman, replacing the positions of foreground and background in the process, but at the same time binding the two with the camera as the first woman bound them with her embrace and invitation to share the singing of the song. *"The harvest can fill a big barn."* The camera then walks with them and moves constantly, rising high above them:"*Our rice paddies are being"*—"*What?*"/"*Being planted." /"*Hurray*!*"

In this way the two old women, the main representatives of the spirit of the film, are introduced together with the main theme as articulated in the title: "Position among the Stars," and the circling positioning of the intimate ubiquitous camera.

Rumidjah Shamsjuddin, the 74 year old matriarch of the Shamsjuddin family, and Rumidjah's dearest lifelong friend Tumisah are featured in all three films of the trilogy. Over the course of three films viewers have seen Rumidjah and her family experience the major transitions of their times:

- from rural to urban environments,
- from dictatorship to liberalized but authoritarian democracy,
- from a secular to fundamentalist Muslim-dominated culture, and
- from a more localized to a more globalized economy.

This final film in the trilogy, *Position Among the Stars,* focuses on three generations of the family. Rumidjah lives in her ancestral bamboo frame home in a poor rural village, close to her old friend, Tumisah. Her son, Bakti and her grand-daughter, Tari live in the complicated cityscape of Jakarta.

Through the film's strikingly personal cinema verité/ direct cinema style, the audience experiences the story of how these Indonesian family members face and struggle with the political, religious, and economic pressures and contradictions of their changing world. The intimacy and artistry—and global resonance—of this portrayal is so well-achieved cinematically that *Position Among the Stars* and its predecessors have won almost every major festival award available throughout their run, including both the Best in Festival award at IDFA and at Sundance in 2010 and 2011. The cinematic and storytelling artistry of Retel-Helmrich is so highly regarded that his trilogy was selected for exhibition at MOMA in September, 2011. The *New York Times* reviewer said of the film:

> "Engrossing, poetic and often very funny, *Position*, like its predecessors, uses the lens of a single family to view the tumult of an entire country." [25] [open endnotes in new window]

The visuals capture, in the mirror of car windows, for example, and the story inhabits both the ahistorical and social time. We feel the seeming timelessness of natural beauty, stars, and the poetry of the cinematic look. But the film also examines the historical causes of the family's conflicts—the necessary overthrow of Suharto and the rise of Muslim cultural power. The very title of the film ironically juxtaposes historical and "natural" time. The family must, it seems, fight desperately for a position—economic and social, achievable through education, they

An armless beggar in Jakarta smiles as with great dexterity she talks on her cell phone.

believe. They seek a position "among the stars" that will enable the entire family to escape the harsh realities of Indonesian history. Yet the film portrays such escapes visually not as economic successes, but in moments of literally seeing the stars, poetic moments that remind us in images that money isn't everything.

These films represent a breakthrough in the now classic direct-cinema techniques of documentary film. The primary elements of the film's achievement begin with the close attention of Leonard Retel-Helmrich and his sister Hetty Retel-Helmrich Naijkens to the characters, story, and cinema verité /direct cinema process.

Rumidjah, Tari, and Bakti in the Jakarta house.

Bakti raises fighting fish that he thinks will win some money. The shot suggests a relation between the distortions of the economy and the distortion of his face.

Bakti's wife, Sri, maintains a food stand to help support the family.

Tari is walking in her red graduation dress with Rumidjah and Bakti in Jakarta. The family's hopes for the future and to improving their position rest on Tari's education. But how will they afford it?

Rumidjah watches the cockroaches scurry in front of an insecticide fog on a neighborhood street, sprayed to control dengue fever. Everyone is exposed to the poison, including the children, who play in the fog.

The cockroach she has been watching (during a lengthy live shot of him) succumbs to the spray.

The filmmakers lived near or with the Shamsjuddin family for up to six months of each of the twelve years and filmed the family's daily life for up to six hours every day. Their goal of capturing the depth of human character and story in turn led to Leonard's deeply theoretical, aesthetic and technical cinematic education and

practice that followed from the work of Andre Bazin and resulted in a radical new human-centered technical and aesthetic style that Leonard called "single-shot cinema." The style dictates that observational cinema should be filmed in close, moving, and free proximity to the subject. It relies on Leonard's small, simple and practical "steady-wing" camera mounting device, new hi-functioning auto-setting cameras, and practice and facility with the technique and style.

This results in the film's amazing artistry, images, and apparently unaffected natural subject behavior. In one memorable shot, the camera glides behind, above, beneath, over and around the child, Bagus, a young nephew who is joyously and mischievously dashing through the narrow alleys and open sewers of his crowded Jakarta neighborhood with the neighbors' pilfered laundry, the shirts flying

A crowd gathers to catch the Muslim alms money tossed into the air in the poor neighborhoods.

Tari and her friends have a different idea of stardom; they sing a rock song, "one day I will be a star..." The conflicting meanings for the generations and the material circumstances of these people that is reflected in the title of the film is that for Rumidjah, a "position amongst the stars" has always meant a place within her community and her environment. For Bakti, it means raising income and his class status. And for Tari, it means gaining recognition within a global celebrity-defined pop culture.

Tari is failing her interview test for Muslim scholarship support for her education. She did not know the principles of Muslim belief. What will her future hold?

gloriously behind his outstretched hands. The camera perfectly captures the spirit and joy of his act in a way that is complementary and appropriate to the moment. [27] The shots are filmed with the aid of simple but inventive devices in addition to the steady-wing camera support—bamboo cranes. The same can be said for a shot that follows a working class man crossing a railway trestle on a narrow plank a thousand feet above the valley below. The camera follows him, swoops out from him, in close to him, and then directly over him, without hesitating a moment or missing a beat of movement. It captures for audiences both the extraordinary quality of this dizzying, visionary experience for the viewer and the ordinary quality of it to the worker (who helped film the shots with a camera mounted on a helmet he was wearing.).[28] While these bravura shots dramatically stand out and punctuate and celebrate these lives, mastery of the style lies in the vast majority of shots that exercise the same care, expertise and style in the intimate environs of the domestic space of these characters.

For example, the camera circles sympathetically the scene of wreckage around Bakti's wife, Siri, after he has pushed over the food stand where she was cooking and trying to help out with the family's income. She cries as she holds up the bent and ruined pots. Such understated virtuosity can be seen in the climactic scene in the film, which takes place in Bakti's small cramped household toward the end of the film. Rumidjah's son Bakti suddenly erupts in anger, strikes her granddaughter, Tari, pushes Tari into her tiny bedroom and down onto the bed and screams at her. This is in response, we find out, to Tari's FaceBook and YouTube-promulgated flirtations and her physical contact with a young boy. It's a clear violation of propriety in this Muslin community and household. Rumidjah witnesses and is caught in the middle of the outburst. The camera navigates the scene within the constricted environment of the tiny household like another one of the characters— familiar with the environment. In the process it records Bakti's violence, anger and then concern; Tari's insolence, irreverence, hurt, and then humiliation; and Rumidjah's devastation.

The key elements of the greater story emerge, collide, converge, and climax here. At heart this film and the trilogy about these three generations has dealt with family survival and re-generation in the face of the profound social, in this case political, religious and economic pressures. Tari is Rumidjah's and Bakti's hope, especially through her education. Bakti has long since converted from Christianity to Islam to facilitate it. Rumidjah has mortgaged her house to pay for it, in her beloved village with its daily life and her childhood friend. Tari now has threatened this hope with her youth, pop-cultural fascination, materialism, and forbidden physical encounter with a boy that threatens both her education and reputation in the Muslin community. Tari has become a global teenager, a figure all too familiar to the audience, almost a stereotype (if this were a fiction film, one could complain that the problem of modern youth is all too painfully frequent in recent Indonesian films).[29]

Bakti tells her that she cannot violate the Muslim laws and traditional cultural mores, that she cannot violate her grandmother's financial risk and support. He says that she is smarter then any of them, that she is the only one capable of a higher education, and she is the hope they have to advance their family's lives. The camera then moves in to Rumidjah's face as she listens to the last of this. It moves closer and closer as she struggles with the weight and stress of all that has occurred and her own inability to resolve the issues in her family and Jakarta—and her decision to leave the city. Her brow moves and the camera fades to black in preparation for the final scene featuring the family's trip to the train station, past the beggars and poorest of the poor and past the palatial neighborhoods and richest of the rich. Tari looks out of the window in which these scenes of Jakarta pass by as reflections. In the final scene of the film Rumidjah returns to the ancestral village, home, and friend she left behind in the first scene. This last scene echoes the first.

But rather than dew drops that appear to be stars, we witness real stars. And instead of a childhood song about dew drops, we hear a childhood song about stars and the desire to find a position among the stars.

Tari and her friends at the mall taking cell phone photos. The contradictions unleashed by western consumerist display and technology here are a significant aspect of the film's analysis.

Tari's friend tries on a blue contact lens to have blue eyes. "Better than brown eyes," Tari says.

Sri sobs while cleaning up her kitchen, damaged by the outraged Bakti's burst of anger. She killed some of his fighting fish because his obsession was making him neglect the family.

Bakti has found out about Tari's violation of Muslim rules, and he slaps her when he comes home.

Bakti talks to her from outside the door of her room.

Rumidjah listens and decides she must go home.

A begging monkey on the way to the train, where Tari will say goodbye to Rumidjah.

Tari's face in the car window fades to Rumidjah in the train.

In the last scene Rumidjah is re-united with Tumisah. That night they take a walk into the fields, to look at the stars, as they have done since they were children. Tumisah, whom Leonard and Hetty describe as the voice of wisdom in the story, says:

> "Don't think of wealth all the time, Rumidjah. Possessions take possession of you."[30]

Rumidjah nods and says, "You cannot see the stars in Jakarta."

As they look up to see the Southern Cross and a Shooting Star, they sing, as they did in the beginning of the film, a traditional children's song remembered from childhood.

> *You little star way up high*
> *There you are shining in the sky*
> *I would love to fly and dance with you*
> *and to find my place among the stars.*

Tumisah's wisdom about possessions and the upheaval in Rumidjah's family.

And yet, much as this seems to resolve the narrative according to Tumisah's wisdom, it is the expression of a utopian, immortal desire ("I would love") rather than the desire for a "position" that animates the family. This latter desire, this hope for an economic rescue with its share of desperation, not only characterizes the family's historical situation, but in this third film of the trilogy demonstrates how the economic and religious pressures they are now experiencing have replaced the significance of the revolution against Suharto that opened the first film and first motivated documentarist Retel Helmrich's interest.

Position among the Stars focuses on family conflict. But does it do so to continue hiding the horrors of the violent Indonesian past, with the hundreds of thousands of bodies left buried or thrown into the sea during Suharto's regime still unremembered? Should the nostalgia be for these dead rather than for the stars of childhood? Perhaps. But Retel Helmrich has directed a powerful reading of the historical dialectic that catches this family up in the most intimate spaces. Their yearning, however mistaken, is finally invested in Tari, in the future, rather than in nostalgia for returning to the village. The latter would perhaps also entail confronting the terribleness of those past days, left unredeemed after the overthrow of Suharto, together with the revolutionary dreams of Bakti, his family, and Retel Helmrich himself. Thus the ambiguity of the title. Is it about a timeless position within the natural world, suggested by long shots of animals, dewdrops, and stars? Is it a position among the stars of cinema and reality television so admired by Tari? Or the stardom produced by the extraordinary artistry of the camera's single-shot attentiveness? Or a position among the stars of progress and economic success, the idea that obsesses the family, but that contradicts so much that they value?

Tumisah and Rumidjah look up at the sky and sing a song about the stars, faces illuminated by their lanterns. The song bookends the film, recalling at the end the opening song about the dew drops.

This final film in the trilogy about the Indonesian family was produced by Scarabee Films, the production company of the Helmrich family, and also by several other institutions: academic (for example, Harvard University), public (e.g. the Netherlands Fund for Film) and film industry (the Sundance Institute). This prestigious support points to an interest in the humanistic and artistic contribution

Concluding the circle of the film: the stars as seen from the country and the electrical towers leading to Jakarta.

made by Helmrich's filmmaking more than to any political argument he might be making. His portrait of a family in Indonesia is less journalistic and more novelistic than the other two films discussed in this paper.[31] That said, an early review in *Variety* thought the film too "low-budget" to play outside the Netherlands.[32] The family featured in the films, according to producer Hetty Naijkens,

> "were present at the premiere in the Erasmushuis in Indonesia and they said they like the film. Actually they look at the film as a home video and not as a film or documentary. They are not aware of the fact that they are 'world-famous.' Only Tari knows about it because she has a connection with the world by Facebook."[33]

The documentary has earned its reputation through the screenings where it has been presented. Like *Budrus* and *Green Wave*, this film was accepted in a large number of film festivals (over 40) from Durban, South Africa, to Shanghai. *Position among the Stars* won the "Best Full-Length Feature" at IDFA and the highest award at Sundance. And the second *New York Times* review, titled "A Master of Impossible Camera Angles," talked about Helmrich's "single shot " technique at length, pointing out that it made small things such as the cockroach as significant as moments of high drama.[34] Finally, *Position Among the Stars* is now available on HBO and at the HBO online website. "Home movies" have found a position among the stars. It is significant because these "home movies" depict with extraordinary artistry the way that intimate lives enact and reflect contradictions that haunt us all.

All of these films document a transnational commonality of human rights. These films do this in very different ways that celebrate the past, present and future of documentary and suggest ways of illuminating and documenting our dissatisfaction with state and corporate violations of civil and human rights, our love of art, creativity and communication, our need for harmony with the natural world of which we are a part, and our position—if you will—-among the stars.

In this way they share a utopian vision of a cinematic avant-garde that unites social revolutions with art, here with innovations in filmmaking. Thus these three films represent a new version of an avant-garde practice in cinema that unites social commitment with aesthetic experiment. Emma Goldman would approve of that union. Bacha's successful integration of participant recordings into her film, *Budrus*; Ahadi's use of social media and animation to bring to life the reality of the Iranian *Green Wave* protests and the horror of the aftermath; and Retel-Helmrich's invention of "single-shot" direct-cinema techniqu

Go to notes page

Notes

1. For example, "The Good Pitch Europe" for June 2012 is bringing together filmmakers and funders looking for films with a social conscience. The funders, according to a recent email from BRITDOC, will include Amnesty International, BBC Worldwide, Berlinale, Bertha Foundation, British Council, Channel 4, Comic Relief, Edelman, European Fund for Investigative Journalism, Fallon, Google, Greenpeace, Human Rights Watch, Institut Francais, International Herald Tribune, Kickstarter, New York Times Op-Docs, Nokia, Occupy Movement, Ofcom, Pascal Decroos Fund, Pulitzer Centre for Crisis Reporting, Robert F. Kennedy Foundation Europe, Roddick Foundation, Swedish Film Institute, Sundance Institute, The Co-Operative, The Elders, The Sigrid Rausing Trust, Thomson Reuters Foundation, Time Warner, Tony Blair Africa Governance Initiative, Tribeca New Media Fund, Virgin Unite, WWF, Al Jazeera, Ashoka, BFI, Big Lottery Fund, CPH:DOX, Dogwoof, FILMCLUB, IDFA, National Trust, Oak Foundation, Open Society Foundations, Oxfam, Rare Day, Sheffield Doc/Fest, Stonewall, Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Trust, WPP, ZDF….[return to page 1 of essay]

2. *Budrus*, Julia Bacha, Director, 2010. See the web site at (http://www.justvision.org/budrus) for the trailer, background information, a list of the 46 festivals that selected the film in 2010 and the many awards that it won, and the over 175 stories about it that have been featured in the press internationally.

3. *The Green Wave*, Directed Ali Samadi Ahadi, Festival screenings 2010-11; Red Flag theatrical release in the U.S. scheduled for 2012. See Imdb for trailer, press reports: (http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1667130/). Web site is (http://www.thegreenwave-film.com/). It contains in particular a list of sources to learn more about the Green Revolution in Iran including reports from the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran.

4. *Stand van de Sterren (Position among the Stars),* Director Leonard Retel Helmrich; producer Hetty Naaijkens-Retel Helmrich, 2010. See http://www.standvandesterren.nl/en/home.php?lang=EN for videos and news articles as well as cast and crew.

5. The role international film festivals play today in regards to documentary film is, like the films themselves, growing and evolving. Both dramatic film-centered festivals such as Cannes, Toronto, Venice, Sundance, Berlin, and Tribeca, and documentary film festivals such as IDFA, Hot Docs, Full Frame, Silver Docs, and Cinéma du Réel are supporting, promoting and featuring documentary films and filmmakers for growing numbers of film audiences.

There is a significant rise in the number of documentaries submitted and screened as well as the number of viewers, directors, subjects, funders, distributors, and concerned social issue and human rights organization representatives attending. The numbers of funding, marketing, producing, and educational events supporting and promoting documentary cinema story-telling arts and their social and cultural impact are rising as well. Festivals are thus becoming much more than screenings and competitions; they are increasingly playing a major role in supporting the advancement of films and the culture, media and society they portray. At the same time that I want to acknowledge the problems of festivals: it's hard to be accepted into them, it costs money, and since government funding of these festivals is diminishing, the pressure of funding may be a critical issue. However, they have instigated an audience for documentary films that changes the landscape.

All three of these films have taken extensive advantage of festival exposure, and then gone on to release the films to theaters and television and DVD sales. I have been able to show them in my classroom. They are of such high quality that 87% of Rotten Tomatoes critics gave *Budrus* a "fresh" and 100% of critics liked *The Green Wave* and *Position among the Stars.*

6. Jay Winter, *Dreams of Peace and Freedom: Utopian Moments in the Twentieth Century* (Yale UP: New Haven, CT, 2007).

7. A number of experiments with using citizen journalism and "curating" or editing the resources into films and websites are going forward. A thoughtful and extensive example of "crowdsourcing" is Jigar Mehta's "Eighteen Days in Egypt," which exists in several forms, reaches out to an extensive participatory audience, and can be located on a website: http://http://beta.18daysinegypt.com

8. See a demonstration of the single shot technique and the steady wing camera attachment at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TL2GUHi6W3c.

9. The panel with Judith Helfand and Orlando Bagwell was part of the 2010 Silverdocs Conference, Silver Springs Maryland.

10. Daniel Miller, Interview with Julia Bacha. IDFA, Amsterdam, November 2010.

11. Interview with Iltesham Morrar, Research Interviews with Israeli and Palestinian Peacebuilders , Just Vision Web Site. (http://www.justvision.org/portraits/all)

12. An updated site with links to news coverage of the film and its story is at (http://www.justvision.org/budrus/press/budrus-press-coverage)

13. For a sample of those newsmakers who found it to be "news" in 2010 that there could be nonviolent protest and change in Palestine see, for example:

- Charlie Rose Oct. 11, 2010 (http://www.charlierose.com/view/interview/11238)

Andrea Mitchell reports: Oct. 6, 2010 (http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/21134540/vp/39540932#39540932)

- Ethan Bronner, "To Take Up Arms or Not: A Film Joins the Debate." *New York Times*, Oct. 1, 2010. (http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/03/movies/03budrus.html?pagewanted=1&_r=2&ref=documentary_films_and_programs)
- R.M. Schneiderman & Joanna Chen. "The Peaceful Intifada." *Newsweek* August 13, 2010. (http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2010/08/13/documenting-nonviolent-protest-on-the-west-bank.html)
- Ari Berman, "The New Face of Palestinian Resistance." May 3, 2010. "The Notion"/*The Nation.*
- "Palestinian non-violence: The story of Budrus. A documentary film about a village that succeeds eventually in saving its trees." *The Economist.* Aug 19, 2010. From the print edition online: http://www.economist.com:node:16843691%3Fstory_id=16843691&fsrc=rss
- Nicholas D. Kristof. "Waiting for Gandhi." *New York Times*: Opinion. July 10, 2010 (http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/11/opinion/11kristof.html)

14. See the "Screenings" list on the Just Vision website: (http://www.justvision.org/events_archive)

15. Just Vision also has several other films and an extraordinary website of resources for using them. Just Vision's multi-media outreach and extensive educational website provides a useful model for organizers using any kind of documentary film as a prompt for discussion and fundraising. The website also encourages networking, providing a list of peacebuilding and nonviolence organizations. See http://www.justvision.org

16. For example, nonviolent protest at Bil'in has succeeded also in winning a legal victory against the placement of the wall and building settlements, but the law has not been finally enforced, so the struggle persists. Another award-winning documentary film has emerged from a project at Bil'in, one man's "home movies" of his family, his village, and the protests over settlement. *Five Broken Cameras* is the product of a joint Israeli-Palestinian effort between Emad Burnat, the Palestinian cinematographer who filmed the town and his relatives and their struggle for more than five years, and Guy Davidi, Israeli activist, director and producer, with production support from Israel and a number of other countries. As in *Budrus,* the news is from among the people of the town, about the nonviolent international collaboration and the extraordinary film.

17. A commissioning editor at Arte helped them finance this time-driven production, so that they finished the complex filming/animation in ten months. German producers from Arte, Dreamer Joint Venture Filmproduction, Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR),and VPRO from the Netherlands all collaborated with the Iranian/German director and crew.

18. Information about the making of this film draws upon a personal interview with Daniel Miller carried out with the filmmaker after the

screening of the film in November, 2010 at IDFA.

19. See the web site at
http://bookcollecting101.com/interview-with-iranian-born
-book-artist-alireza-darvish/ for some of his work.

20. Interviewees included Iranians in exile such as Nobel Peace Prize-winning attorney and activist Dr. Shirin Ebadi, and International Criminal Tribunals and Human Rights Representative and Professor Payam Akhavan.

21. See the somewhat controversial Wikipedia entry that says Ahmadinejad may have had the support of the majority of Iranians, before and after the election. The entry says some polling from inside and outside the country before the election and after showed Ahmadinejad ahead. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iranian
_presidential_election,_2009#Polling)

22. For reports on the "men of violence" who might be responsible for the Human Rights abuses committed against Green Wave protesters, see the web page from the Iran Human Rights Organization. (http://www.iranhumanrights.org/wp-content/
wp-content/menofviolence/MenofViolence.html)

23. Sukhdev Sandhu, "Cinema and the Arab spring: the revolution starts here." *The Guardian*. Monday 19 September 2011 17.30 EDT
http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2011/
sep/19/cinema-and-arab-spring-ica

24. However, the influence of *The Green Wave* in the United States probably remains very small because Americans have seen little of it as yet. It is scheduled for distribution by Red Flag beginning in the summer of 2012. It appeared at Sundance in early 2011 and has now been chosen as part of the Sundance "FILM FORWARD: Advancing Cultural Dialogue" project, which showed it in Arizona in March and will take it to India next.

25. Jeannette Catsoulis, "Upheaval in a Family That Hopes to Stand Out." *New York Times*. September 14, 2011.
http://movies.nytimes.com/2011/09/15/movies/
position-among-the-stars-from-indonesia-review.html

26. Leonard Retel-Helmrich and Hetty Naaijkens Retel-Helmrich. Interview with Daniel Miller. At Silver Docs Documentary Film Festival. Silver Springs Md., June, 2011.

27. You can look at the scene of the boy running on YouTube:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bMQ__wVW3vw&feature=related

28. See the bridge scene on YouTube:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vGkD8YFleyU&feature=related

29. See, for example, Dag Yngvesson's discussion of Indonesian films about youth culture in the last decade, in "Let's Get Lost: Unmapping History And *Reformasi* in the Indonesian Film *Tiga Hari Untuk Selamanya*." "Three Days

to Forever."(*Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*. No. 53, summer 2011). <http://www.ejumpcut.org/currentissue/DagIndonesia/text.html> The Indonesian fiction film, *Tiga Hari Untuk Selamany* (Three Days to Forever) similarly takes place after nearly a decade of disappointment about the possibility of reform after Suharto. He says that film

> *"*returns ... to the melodramatic space of family conflict, which historically has served as a container and in some sense a hiding place for the most unspeakable aspects of local experience."

30. Helmrich and Naijkens said that the key line in the film was this one, when Rumidjah talks about her family buying things and asking for money, and Tumisah retorts with her statement about possessions. Interview, Daniel Miller. Silver Springs Md., June, 2011.

31. His film was nominated by the European Film Academy for the Documentary Prix Arte award, and by the Writers Guild of America in 2012 for the Best Documentary Screenplay. He has taught at Harvard and is scheduled to teach at New York University in 2012.

32. Leslie Felperin., Review. "Position Among the Stars" (Stand van de sterren). *Variety* Nov. 29, 2010. http://www.variety.com/review/VE1117944130/ (accessed June 7, 2012)

33. Hetty Naijkens' email to Daniel Miller's inquiry about whether the films had screened in Indonesia. She replied that there had been so far only two premieres there. June 13, 2012.

34. John Anderson. "A Master of Impossible Angles." Review. *New York Times*. September 9, 2011: http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/11/movies/leonard-retel-helmrichs-documentaries-capture-closed-spaces.html?_r=3 (accessed June 7, 2012).

The sodden suburb where I came of age. I knew about Bridgeview's atrocious conditions, as evidenced by this photo I took for our local weekly paper. Credit: *Surrey Delta Messenger*, October 23, 1975.

Vancouver, B.C. in the 1970s. Credit: City of Vancouver Archives 1435-46 - British Columbia

Media activists for livability: an NFB experiment in 1970s Vancouver

by Jean Walton

It was in part the striking contrast between the sodden, featureless suburb where I came of age, and the alluring cultural hub to its immediate North that made me want, in the first place, to write an autobiographical novel set near Vancouver in the seventies. Combing the Internet in search of images that could take me back to the hockey rinks and logging trucks of my teen years, I hit pay dirt: production stills depicting the rosy-cheeked mayor I recalled from those days, confronting a group of working-class residents who had lived down the hill from us. Bridgeview was a tight-knit neighborhood flanked by scrapyards and sawmills, and that seemed to be sinking into the mud along the banks of the Fraser River.

I had been aware, at the time, of the atrocious conditions of this little corner of our municipality of Surrey—dilapidated single-family homes fronted by open ditches that flooded in the wet season—but I hadn't realized that Canada's National Film Board (NFB) had come to town to make a documentary film about Bridgeview residents' battle for a decent sewer system, which is to say, their battle for existence. *Some People Have to Suffer*, the film was titled, and while it is not among the hundreds available for streaming on the NFB website, I was able to purchase it in DVD format through their online store. I was soon treated to all the period footage I could have hoped for of Surrey's suburban and industrial landscape: stained stucco under flapping tarpaulins, school kids in parkas dodging puddles, geese and horses sharing the residential landscape with trucks and bulldozers, and a vintage cast of talking heads. There was the mealy-mouthed Mayor that my grandmother had found so handsome, with his Dudley Do-Right face and his disdain for the downtrodden; the part-time aldermen drawn from the local business ranks, shrugging polyestered shoulders as they walked the tightrope between profit and "the people;" city administrators, weighing the pros and cons of industrial encroachment; and the citizens themselves, mostly first- or second-generation immigrants of British or German origin, set among crochet afghans of the living room, cigarette displays of the convenience store, or the banks of the river itself as they put their case to the camera. "They have an awful lot of homes to get for people before they phase us out," asserts one angry resident. "And if I have to get a shotgun, they won't phase me out."

This and following images are from *Some People Have to Suffer*, dir. Christopher Pinney, National Film Board, 1976.

Bill Vander Zalm, Surrey's rosy-cheeked mayor.

Bridgeview, a tight-knit neighborhood hemmed in by industry.

Bridgeview's ditches flooding during the rainy season.

In Bridgeview, horses sharing the residential landscape …

… with bulldozers.

Curious about the provenance of this film, I hunted down its director, Christopher Pinney, and thereby stumbled on a long-obscured chapter in the history of media democracy. In this article I tell the story of *Some People Have to Suffer* (1976), and perhaps more important, of the larger state-sponsored—but activist—media project out of which it emerged. For as it turns out Chris Pinney was the regional coordinator of the West Coast division of one of the National Film Board's most radical forays into community-based documentary, the Challenge for Change program (1967-1980). This film was only the most polished artifact of an extensive community activist project, set in the municipality of my youth, during a volatile era in the history of urban and suburban development in Vancouver and its outlying neighbors. We may live in a digital age that promises universal access to media resources, but we can learn a lot from this pre-digital episode in the history of media activism on Canada's West Coast.

I propose that we ask not whether media can truly be democratized (it always can or cannot, depending on your perspective), but rather what makes one experiment different from another, depending on how its social goals are framed and how it
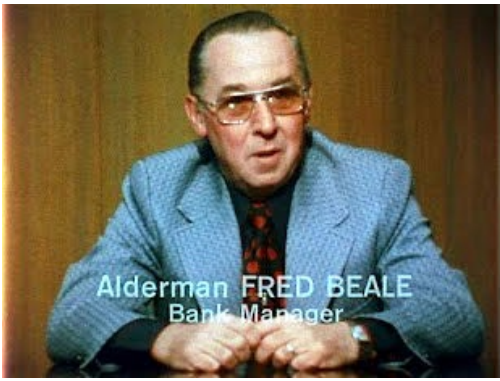
Some People Have to Suffer features part-time aldermen drawn from the local business ranks, shrugging polyestered shoulders as they walk the tightrope between profit and "the people."

"I do a little bit of crewing with various people but…I don't have the responsibility of a boat anymore, so it seems that I devote a lot of time to whatever I do, so this (being an alderman) filled a gap."

"I like to have industrial and residential close by —I like to get back to this concept of walking to work. We talk about saving energy, we talk about an access problem, I'm talking about— well, let's have industry and people a little closer together."

fits into and transforms the immediate geopolitical landscape that serves as its setting. With its reputation for utopian living, its geographical location on the Canadian edge of the Pacific Rim, its proximity to water, mountains, and wildlife, Vancouver has served in the last few decades as a global model for city planning— so much so that architects and planners have coined "Vancouverism" as a shorthand term for desirable urban design. See for example this photo essay on Vancouver-branded Developments in China: http://www.vancitybuzz.com/2012/05/vancouver-name-used-to-sell-in-mainland-china/.

For these reasons alone, the recent history of its evolution is worth interrogating, particularly with respect to whether and how the average citizen participated in decisions about development. Because it focused directly on land use issues in British Columbia in the seventies, the NFB's Challenge for Change program produced a rich repository of documents that shed light on the relation of the suburbs to this shining metropolis that has emerged as the "Shangri-La" of Canada. Just as importantly, the program revealed how alliances might be formed between political interests too often thought to be at odds with each other—those of working class residents with a sharp sense of community belonging, and of environmentalists challenging the apparent inevitability of industrial encroachment.

The Challenge for Change Program

Challenge for Change (CFC) was a world-famous experiment that brought community development together with film and video expertise to address social and political problems across Canada between 1967 and 1980. As government-sponsored programs go, Challenge for Change (and its Quebecois version, *Societé Nouvelle*) was unprecedented in its commitment to facilitating citizen awareness and activism. The idea was to identify troubled locales where social, economic, and political conflicts might be effectively resolved if the residents were trained by "social animators" in the use of film and video to gain a more active role in the decision-making processes that most affected them.[1] [open endnotes in new window]

The program had been piloted in Newfoundland, where what came to be called the "Fogo process" was developed, and where an emissary with a camera was "as much a community development worker as a filmmaker."[2] The residents of Fogo Island, off the coast of Newfoundland, had undergone serious economic hardship when the fishing industry began to fail; more than half were on welfare, many slated for relocation by the federal government. The NFB Challenge for Change program, under the directorship of Colin Low, stepped in and made a series of films in which the local people discuss their daily lives, not for "public" distribution, but to be shown privately among Fogo's own, dispersed population. The films

> "acted as something external which mediated the hostility that might have erupted in face-to-face confrontation among people with opposing views" (Kurchak, 122).

Changes did occur following the presence of the NFB in Fogo insofar as the impoverished residents were said to have gained new confidence in the idea of
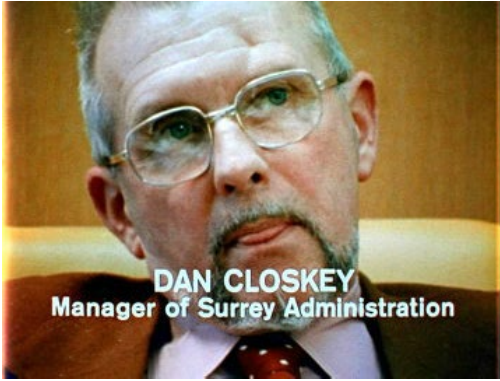
"When people live in an area like Bridgeview they feel…oppressed because they haven't had the same level of services that other parts of the municipality has, so they're bound to react in an emotional rather than in an objective way."

"I think a kindergarten can do a better job than them guys doing out there. They're just a bunch of…"

"If I have to get a shotgun, they won't phase me out."

collective action and, indeed, formed a fishing co-op and marketing board. The government, meanwhile, pulled back on its intention to move people to the mainland, and it altered a law pertaining to fishing boats that better met the fishermen's actual needs (Kurchak, 122-23). Critics differed on whether these changes were the result of the CFC program; but the practice of using film, and then of training local citizens in the use of video, was repeated in every province across the country. For the most part, the local incarnations of the program were framed either explicitly in terms of poverty and the welfare state (echoing the "war on poverty" that had been launched under the Johnson administration in the United States) or in terms of what we would now call identity politics, offering media assistance, for instance, to First Nations groups or empowering women to address labor or childcare issues.

McGill-Queens has just published a substantial volume of critical articles on the program, and a wide array of the films produced under CFC auspices have been made available for streaming on the National Film Board website. It is possible now for a whole new generation of film scholars and media activists to contemplate these social and media experiments set in inner-city Montreal and Halifax, obscure fishing villages of Newfoundland, and small mining communities in Alberta.[3] Taken as a whole, the book and the films open up a complex set of questions about the role of the state in facilitating citizen access to the public sphere, and of how media tools can be used to address poverty and social welfare, whether problems be framed in terms of a waning industrial era, depletion of natural resources, squalid urban living conditions, or gender, race, and colonial inequities.

While for the most part, the Challenge for Change program has been hailed as having led the way in state-sponsored "media democracy," questions have been raised about the larger implications of federal sponsorship of a purportedly radical form of media intervention. Structurally speaking, is it possible to challenge a system that itself provides the economic base for the activism in question? What interests are served by the mechanisms through which social animators are employed to mobilize groups of people, indeed, to interpellate them in their capacity as "citizens" of a local constituency, a province, a nation? What precisely is meant by "change" in the formula: "challenge for change?" How does one measure the efficacy of the use of video and film technology, even if the question of "change" has been defined?[4]

Marie Kurchak critiqued the program as early as 1972, in her article "What Challenge? What Change?" Several regional CFC experiments were in the planning stages by this time, including the project that Chris Pinney's film emerged from. Kurchak had just attended a "recent re-organizational meeting" at which the regional directors "emphasized their concern for long-range projects rather than social documentaries."

> "For instance, in a land-use planning project in Surrey (a suburb of Vancouver), co-ordinator Chris Pinney will be using film and VTR to encourage people to participate in community decisions that affect the area in which they live. Pinney looks upon this as 'a very conservative notion: getting people to depend on themselves and create their own communities rather than depending on remote governments to make all the decisions.'" (Kurchak, 125)

Kurchak's main concern in her assessment of the program was that "long-term subtle attitudinal changes are needed as well as immediate political and economic change" but "Challenge for Change […] has not defined what it means by social change" (126). That Pinney shared this concern not only to define change more carefully but also to provide, through NFB support, the resources over time to ensure enduring transformation is reflected in the founding Surrey Project document, drafted in the following year:

> "It is not possible to change people's relationship to media and their

community overnight or in six months. We have learned that it is a slow process that may take several years and will only have a lasting impact if given this kind of time frame. For this reason, the project as proposed here is conceived of as being a long-term project with Challenge for change support for two to three years." (Pinney, n.d., 4) [5]

Zoë Druick contextualizes the CFC program in the larger arena of Canada's federal campaign to integrate the welfare state and those it affected with national modernization. She asks whether CFC social animators, wittingly or unwittingly, might simply be reproducing, rather than challenging, the government's desire for cooperation and conformity among its citizens. As the federal government stepped up its "war on poverty," Druick notes, there was a simultaneous "shift in the register of citizenship from the local and the provincial to the national level, an important aspect of nation-building." She traces a historical government-sponsored trend from small-scale to more commercialized modes of making a living:

> "As Canadians became modern, urban citizens, they simultaneously became more national in orientation. According to historians Finkel and Conrad, 'following the Second World War, government policy and economic activity were focused on bringing every Canadian into the modern age. Subsistence survival by farming, fishing, and hunting was deemed unworthy, and rural life, unless fully commercialized, experienced a rapid decline. As a result, many communities became ghost towns, while cities experienced unprecedented growth.' [...] Urbanization was so rapid that where at the end of the Second World War more than one-quarter of Canadians lived on a farm, thirty years later fewer than one in fifteen farmed." (Druick, 2010, 339)

Druick astutely points out that

> "as more and more features of social life were taken over by the state in the postwar period…film became one of the many educational and promotional processes used to convey the new role of the state in administering people's lives" (343).

It became a way to "convey messages about the federal state to the general population—ultimately it became an advocacy tool for federalism itself"(343-344).

In Fogo, for instance, a way of life premised on subsistence fishing would be sacrificed to a more modern, "Canadian" citizenship through the subtly working micropolitics practiced by social animators. An NFB report on what it hoped would be accomplished in Fogo is telling. Emphasis was placed on eliciting and recording discourse from groups of individuals and playing the resultant films to other groups, for the purpose of eliciting more discourse, and so on.

> "By this simple process we hoped to generate confidence in people to formulate and express their problems as they saw them, for it was felt that the expression of problems is a step towards understanding and solving them" (345).

The report goes on,

> "It was believed that the playback of these expressions in the community could reveal the contradictions in individual attitudes and also in group attitudes. It would be a beginning in modifying attitudes, achieved not through dissemination of information or propaganda but through real participation which has the potential of creativity" (345).

The National Film Board's Challenge for Change logo.

Vancouverism is defined as an architectural technique combining a medium-height commercial base with narrow high-rise residential units, and preservation of view corridors (allowing for glimpses of ocean and mountain). Credit: Institute for Urban Design

The language of behavior modification in this passage suggests that what is cast as "expression" can begin to shade off into "confession," as participants are made complicit in their own state-facilitated conformity.

In her reading of individual CFC films on welfare, though, Druick finds that despite the state-serving objectives espoused in official NFB documents, in actual practice, more radical aims were pursued by some activist filmmakers and social animators who truly sought to bring about "a radically democratic public sphere" (352).

She bases this conclusion on a study of CFC welfare films made before 1970; but if we expand this kind of investigation to include the next phase of the program as it unfolded in Surrey on the West coast, we find that both the goals of the NFB, and the accomplishments of its regional practitioners, had moved even further from the federalist tendencies evinced in its earlier incarnations to the East. This was almost entirely due to the decision, made by Chris Pinney and NFB film distributor Jan Clemson, to frame the Surrey Project explicitly in terms of land use, rather than in terms of poverty and welfare.

Who defines livability?

Comparative shots of Vancouver looking East along Georgia Street, with Coal Harbor to the left, dated 1919 and 1973. Credit: Donald Gutstein, Vancouver, Ltd.

Aerial view of Vancouver showing Port Moody to the far right, at the head of Burrard Inlet; False Creek just south of the peninsula that is downtown, with verdant Stanley Park at its tip (jutting out into the mouth of Burrard Inlet); the North Shore mountains shading off into the distance at the top; and the grids and patchworks of South-lying municipalities along the Fraser river basin. Part of Surrey is visible in the lower right hand corner.

The seventies was a pivotal decade for Vancouver, marking its transition from marginal city in a modern world of national capitals, to a throbbing nexus in a postmodern world of global trade. A relatively young city, it owed its origin to a deal made in the 1880s, when the Canadian Pacific Railway [CPR] agreed to move its proposed Western terminal from Port Moody, at the head of Burrard Inlet, twelve miles West to Coal Harbor.
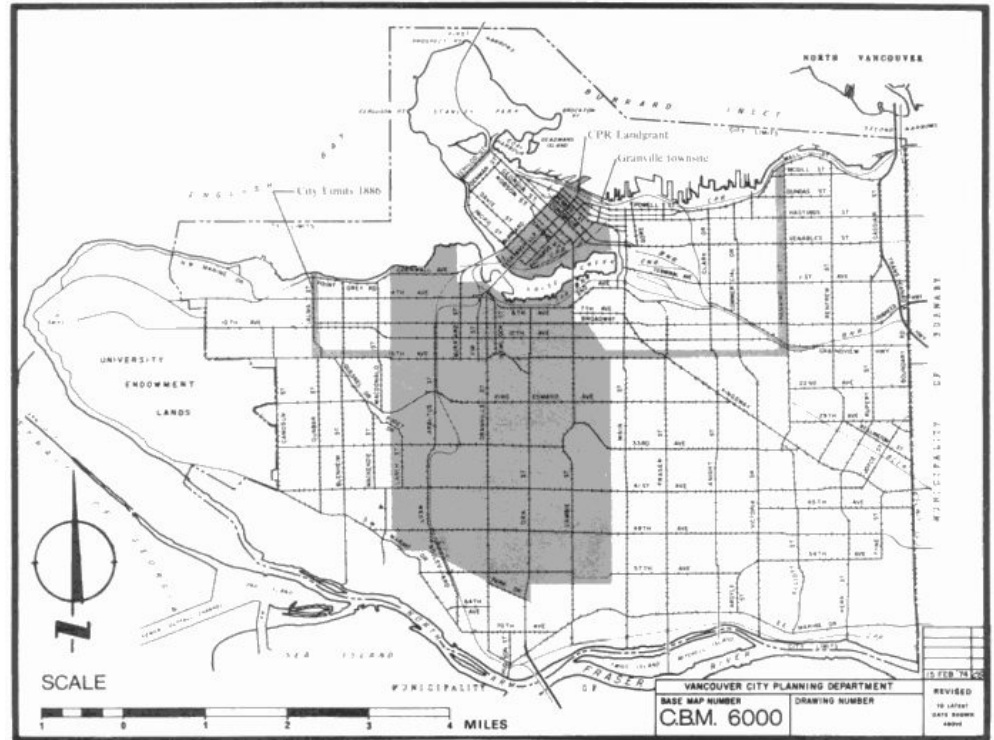
The shaded area is the land grant received by the CPR for extending its line to Vancouver. Vancouver's 1886 city limits are also indicated.

unpolluted waters of Burrard Inlet, top hat in hand,

Land grant of 1886, giving most of what would become Downtown Vancouver to the CPR. Credit: Gutstein, Vancouver, Ltd.

Vancouver's location on the Pacific Rim, a valuable node for global trade.

In return, the railway magnates were granted 6,000 acres of land around the terminus area, which they lost no time surveying to lay out the streets that came to define the city. In the years to follow, the CPR influenced much of the urban character of the city as it developed. For instance, by leasing land to "those industries that generated the most traffic for the railway" the company ensured that False Creek, the inlet at the heart of the city, would remain heavily industrialized right through the 1960s.[6] [open endnotes in new window] If it had been formerly considered an "overblown company town," in the words of Donald Gutstein, far from the cosmopolitan forces of Toronto and Montreal, it was transitioning by the seventies into its new role as a valuable zone of intersection:

> "[Some] cities illustrate the ecological principle that the greatest variety of life-forms will be found at the boundary between different habitats. They are cities of the edge rather than the centre; their opposite is the inland imperial capital—Beijing, Paris, Berlin, Vienna, Moscow—whose purpose is to unify and impose order on their hinterlands. Vancouver belongs, of course, to the first kind of city. Lacking a major administrative or political function, its reason for being is to be situated where four zones intersect: the Western Canadian hinterland, the U.S. and Mexican West Coast, the North Coast up to Alaska, and the Pacific Rim." (Delaney, 19)

Brochure for the newly built Pacific Centre (1971). "Lack of windows, doors, and an uninviting relationship to the sidewalk were strategies used by the developers to get people off the streets into their shopping mall." (Lorimer (1978), 177)

This meant, too, that Vancouver's identity, its very economic survival, was to be premised on the viability of its status as an efficient thoroughfare for the movement of goods from and to the distant points it mediated. The land in and around the city was in constant contention: was any given space to be devoted to its "highest potential" as a site of industry and transportation of goods? Was it to be serviced for residential use, catering to the people who flocked to the west coast to settle? Was it to be cultivated as agricultural land that would provide local food, so that the province need rely less on imports? Or was it to be left in its natural state? These questions were urgent enough for Vancouver proper. For its suburbs, and particularly for the vast municipalities lying to the south, between the Fraser River and the U.S. border, they were all-consuming and overshadowed most other social issues of the time.

Unsurprisingly the question of city planning, in this time of unprecedented growth, radically intensified in the late sixties and early seventies. The work of two scholars of urban politics in this period typified the shifts that were taking place: that of urban sociologist Harvey Molotch, and Canadian economist-turned-publisher, James Lorimer.[7] In a ground-breaking study of urban development, Harvey Molotch dubbed the city as primarily a "growth machine."[8] Beginning with what seems now to be the obvious premise that any given parcel of land is at once a commodity with exchange value (defined by how much profit it can make for its owner) as well as a locality with use value (defined by how it may serve its residents as an environment for daily life), Molotch demonstrated that urban politics was a politics first and foremost of "growth." Developers acquired land parcels, and then they solicited from local government the zoning and taxation conditions necessary to maximize profits by exploiting the land to its "highest and best use." City councils sought to make conditions welcoming for industrial growth in their locality through attempts to maintain

> "the kind of 'business climate' that attracts industry: for example, favorable taxation, vocational training, law enforcement, and 'good' labor relations. To promote growth, taxes should be 'reasonable,' the police force should be oriented toward protection of property, and overt social conflict should be minimized" (Molotch, 312).

Commercial, industrial and residential growth was touted as offering benefits to all, despite evidence to the contrary that it more often "costs existing residents more money" (Molotch, 319).

In Vancouver, one of the more prominent examples of this sort of development scenario would have been the Pacific Centre, a huge shopping mall proposed to the city by the Fairview development firm in the early sixties. The Mayor who had been in negotiation for the deal, Bill Rathie, was defeated by Tom Campbell who had run on a platform opposing the development. But Campbell, too, eventually got behind the deal, ensuring a substantial municipal subsidy to the developer. Opening in 1971, the structure was described by a local columnist as "a bathtub of white tile, upside down at the major intersection of the city" (Lorimer, 177).

Rathie and Campbell fit Molotch's characterization of the "special sort of person" drawn into the politics of the "city as a growth machine:"

> "These people [...] tend to be businessmen and, among businessmen, the more parochial sort. [...They] often become 'involved' in government, especially in local party structure [...]for reasons of land business and related processes of resource distribution." (Molotch, 318)

While some of these individuals might present themselves as "statesmen" who want to foster growth for the whole community rather than one sector, the bottom line is that they are there "to wheel and deal to affect resource distribution through local government." (317).
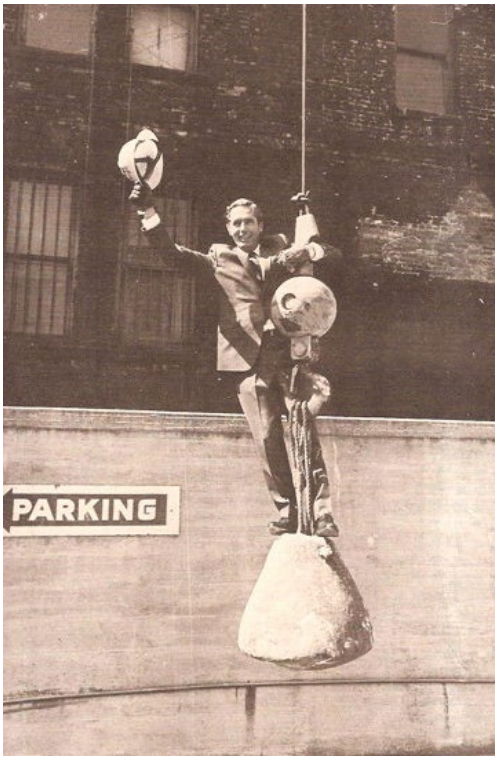
Vancouver Mayor Tom Campbell, himself a developer worth $6 million in real estate by the early seventies, celebrates demolition for one of the city's major downtown development projects. Credit: Lorimer, *Citizen's Guide to Politics*.
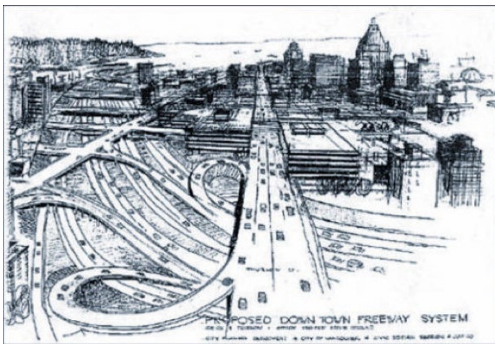
The Big Ditch was one of the more egregious freeway proposals for downtown Vancouver, averted after extensive citizen opposition in the 1960s.

Because these elites are not "statistically representative of the local population as a whole," they must ensure that the interests that brought them to power, that is, control over how resources are distributed, of which land is the primary resource, remain hidden from view. Thus

> "the distributive issues, the matters which bring people to power, are more or less deliberately dropped from public discourse"(318).

Meanwhile, James Lorimer was carrying out a study of the dominant role of entrepreneurs and developers in the shape taken by Canadian cities and suburbs in the mid-seventies.[9] In the post-war era, local governments tended more and more to leave the amassing and servicing of large land banks to private developers, leading inevitably to what Lorimer termed the "corporate suburb."[10] Abdicating to developers so much of the planning of cities and suburbs produced a number of results:

- overpriced properties located in ubiquitous suburban housing tracts;
- the relocation of industry to suburban industrial parks;
- the concentration of shopping in malls dominated by chain stores;
- the limitation of city residential dwellings to high rise apartments; and
- the general assumption that everyone would travel by car (thus, the emphasis on massive freeway projects, catering to automotive rather than mass transit solutions to transportation).

Having detailed the mechanisms and consequences of Canada's thriving development industry, Lorimer concludes his study with a chapter on emerging forms of opposition to the status quo, and points to examples of tentative alternatives to the corporate city in a few locales, including Vancouver. The first inklings of resistance to the post-war craze for development and growth came from citizens' groups who found themselves in the way of "progress"—and were "expected to suffer dislocation, disruption, even financial loss" because of some specific development project in or near their neighborhood (Lorimer, 238). In some instances, politicians and planners themselves began to take their cue from the citizen-based movement, one of the most notable cases, according to Lorimer, occurring in Vancouver.

At the onset of the seventies, city planner Harry Lash set out to produce a planning document that would encompass not only the city proper, but the entire Greater Vancouver Regional District (GVRD)—a vast complex of municipalities including Surrey, the largest, to the south and east of the metropolitan core. But attempts to define livability based on "computer models, social indicators and livability indices" kept running up against dead-ends until finally, Lash had a revelation:

> "Quite suddenly, early in 1972, we did discover the signpost: find out

from the public what livability means; abandon the idea that planners must know the goals first and define the problem; ask the people what they see as the issues, problems and opportunities of the region" (Lash, 1976: 54).[11]
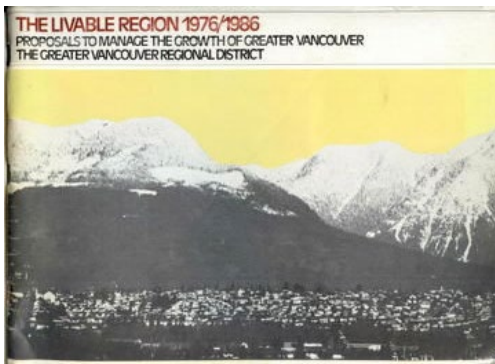
The document that eventually resulted, *The Livable Region 1976/1986*, published in 1975, was the result of three years of public debate, rather than private deals between developers, planners, and elected officials. According to Lorimer, although there might have been criticism about the "extent of the public consultation," Lash's efforts came "far closer than any similar exercise in giving urban residents an opportunity to formulate a comprehensive view of Vancouver's future" (Lorimer, 242). In the words of Harry Lash,

Harry Lash's Livable Region plan, published in 1975, after extensive public debate and citizen input.

"The mood of the Region and the overriding issues were quite beyond anything we had expected [...] The hard kernel of public opinion was, 'A resistance to further rapid growth, a concern for personal livability, a desire to participate in community decisions, and a wish to see action'"(quoted in Lorimer, 243).[12]

And although the plan did not result in a comprehensive implementation of its recommendations, it nevertheless served as a symbol of the climate of the times in Vancouver. "Citizen input" had come to be the catchword of the day where "land use" was concerned.

All of this unfolded within a set of unique electoral outcomes in the early seventies. At the city level, in Vancouver, the socially progressive Electors Action Movement (TEAM) was voted into power in 1972, replacing the pro-development Non-Partisan Association (NPA) that had dominated city council for three decades. TEAM had come into existence primarily as a coalition that helped prevent an NPA-proposed freeway plan, Project 200, that would have wiped out the neighborhood of Strathcona and a good part of Vancouver's Chinatown. Mayor Art Phillips and TEAM were key players in the development of the new GVRD livable city planning process.

Project 200 would have wiped out Vancouver's Chinatown and much of the Strathcona district, had it not been halted by citizen opposition.

Meanwhile, at the provincial level, in 1973 the New Democratic Party, headed by Premier Dave Barrett, ousted the conservative Social Credit party that had held sway over the province for the past several decades. Though the NDP remained in power for only three years (roughly the same period during which the NFB sponsored the Challenge for Change project in Surrey), they implemented a number of sweeping reforms, not the least of which concerned a major land use crisis: the threat to what remained of B.C.'s farmland by developers who were buying it up for redevelopment. In the same year of their election to office, the NDP government instituted Bill 42 (also known as the Land Bill), establishing an Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR) in order to make it more difficult to rezone farmland for industrial, commercial or residential purposes. The importance of Bill 42 cannot be overestimated. While its original intent has been eroded over the decades by developers who have taken advantage of the appeals process by which land may, if deemed appropriate, be released from the reserve for other purposes, the Agricultural Land Reserve is still in existence today, and it is credited with preserving B.C.'s modest swathes of farmland (much of it located in Surrey and the rest of the Fraser Valley).

Why land use?

Let's consider, now, the twinned emphasis on urbanization and nationalization that Druick had examined as an important context for the NFB's activities. The initial NFB document laying out the Surrey Project's background and objectives opened by directly referencing Bill 42 and the Agricultural Land Reserve. It sought to "develop ongoing public involvement and responsibility in coming to terms with the social, economic and political issues raised by land use controls" in a municipality whose "fertile agricultural land" was "rapidly being consumed by urban sprawl" and thus was "most heavily affected by the Land Act [Bill 42]" ("The B.C. Land Use Project," 1). Film, videos, and other media would be used

> "to stimulate local awareness of the issues behind land use controls and
> to help citizens concerned with the development of their community
> interact and influence each other and the various levels of government
> and private institutions presently determining land use planning." ("B.C.
> Land Use," 1)

The project was to be process-oriented, but also to result in films and videotapes that would "serve as catalysts in instructional models on land use problems for other communities in B.C. and Canada." The types of media products would depend on the priorities of the community itself, and many would function only as "self-development tools" for local citizens, rather than as polished films meant for general distribution ("B.C. Land Use," 1).

An important impetus behind the Agricultural Land Reserve act was to slow the unprecedented rate of industrial, commercial and residential growth in the Lower Fraser Valley, where farmers had been selling off their land to developers, who in turn (and in line with the pattern documented in Lorimer's book) were assembling land banks, servicing them, and creating suburban housing tracts, industrial parks, and shopping centers as fast as the local council could process their permit requests. In this respect, the left wing NDP government, at the provincial level, could be seen as working against an unchecked tendency to modernize across the board. To cordon off agricultural land and make it more difficult to develop it for other purposes was effectively to put the brakes on unchecked development, or at least to slow its process.

Because of its large size, the municipality of Surrey offered a representative range of

reactions to the Agricultural Land Reserve, as the authors of the initial Surrey Project document were well aware. Surrey was chosen for a Challenge for Change experiment in land use, they wrote, precisely because it was "a microcosm of land use problems facing the rest of B.C."("B.C. Land Use," 4). South Surrey consisted of mostly agricultural land, as well as a long established residential area that had "little in common with the north"("B.C. Land Use," 4). When council backed a shopping center for this area, to generate revenue for the debt-ridden municipality,

> "local residents reacted strongly to what they saw as an unnecessary development which did not fill local needs but would instead radically change their life-style by attracting new suburban developments into their area"("B.C. Land Use," 5).

In the middle of the municipality was Cloverdale, a farming area, and home to "the most radically pro-development pressure group in the lower Mainland"("B.C. Land Use," 5). This

> "coalition of farmers and landowners vehemently opposed […] Bill 42 and any restriction on their right to buy and sell land. Many of the members of the group had planned to sell their farm land for suburban development and [saw] the blockage of this process by Bill 42 as an infringement on the democratic system"("B.C. Land Use," 5).

The Northern district of the municipality was composed of "working class settlements and industrial areas alongside rapidly mushrooming suburban developments"("B.C. Land Use," 4). City council (for the whole municipality) was "dominated by the north and [was] pro-development oriented"("B.C. Land Use," 4). Bridgeview (one of the working-class settlements of the north, but with no representation on council) was

> "fighting to upgrade living conditions while city council and much of Surrey [saw] the area as socially undesirable, not suited for residential living. They [wanted] to see the residents displaced or relocated"("B.C. Land Use," 5).

Having laid out the differing interests of this potentially very cinematic cast of characters, the report summed up its broader land use objectives as follows:

> "While highly opinionated and informed groups exist in Surrey, most of the public shows little interest or understanding of the issues surrounding development. As a result, public participation in community planning is for the most part limited to what are often unproductive 'confrontation' situations between City Hall and a particular citizens' group. Without better local communication networks it does not appear possible to generate the kind of public interest and involvement that will make citizen participation a credible and ongoing part of municipal planning. It will be the aim of this project to work to help citizens and government build these kind[s] of communications networks. ("B.C. Land Use," 5-6)

Improved communication, increased understanding, citizen involvement, mitigation of "confrontation" situations—these had all become routine goals for Challenge for Change projects across Canada. But what set the CFC Surrey Project apart was its explicit emphasis on land use issues, with a mandate to enhance citizen input into the decisions about residential, industrial and commercial growth, decisions that had hitherto been the sole domain of developers, local politicians, and the municipal administration's planning office. In this respect, the CFC dovetailed with B.C.'s newly invigorated focus on environmental concerns, the downside of growth, and the definition of "livability," as it was being played out in the recently elected provincial government and Harry Lash's GVRD planning committee.

Moreover, as was noted in the project's initial document, Surrey's municipal government at the time was "pro-development oriented," and conformed uncannily

to Molotch's characterization of local politicians as businessmen who catered to developers, and who sought to affect resource distribution through their governing activities. Mayor Bill Vander Zalm made it very clear that he was no Harry Lash, as evidenced in an interview with one of the local weekly papers. When asked whether he thought the municipality communicated adequately with the taxpayers, he replied, "what the people really seek more than anything else is leadership."

> "I think they want a council that is able to make their decisions […] for them rather than all of this "input" we hear so much about. But contrary to what is being said regionally, and contrary to what many local municipal politicians think, I don't believe that the majority of people have time, or in fact, want all of this involvement that we keep hearing about." (Vander Zalm, 30 January 1975, p.4)

The CFC animators' work was cut out for them: to empower diverse constituencies of residents throughout the vast municipality so that they would be able to make their voices heard, even to a mayor (and his like-minded aldermen) who blithely sneered at the very idea of citizen involvement. Moreover, it should be understood that although, in Vancouver, Lash's committee sought to work out a development scheme that would benefit the entire region, it remained an open question as to how Surrey would fit into the larger picture, and what its role would be vis-à-vis the urbane metropolis it neighbored. In a way, by seeking to bring the Harry Lash-style planning revolution to Surrey, Chris Pinney and his animators were helping the municipality to compete for "livability" with Vancouver—or at least to ensure that the big city's livability would not come at the expense of Surrey's.

Finally, as we have seen, in contrast to the scenario sketched out by Zoë Druick, where nationalism dovetailed with urbanization (and large scale industrialization), the provincial NDP government had taken the first step in putting the brakes on unbridled development in British Columbia (most notably in the Fraser Valley where most of the province's agricultural land was located). Now an activist media project funded by the federal government (NFB) was taking the next step. Although its mandate, put most neutrally, was to facilitate through the use of media the needs of citizens with regard to land use issues, it was clear that with regard to the question of "growth," the Surrey Project was more closely allied with the provincial NDP government than with the parochial interests of local government. While the social animators deny that their activities had any connection to politics "with a big P" (either Trudeau's administration in Ottawa, or Barrett's in Victoria), one can see that the project was grounded from the beginning in facilitating cooperation with the goals of the ALR.[13] The CFC animators were "activists" not only for a local citizenry but for an emerging environmentalist approach to land use that pitted levels of government against each other: pro-development Surrey council vs. its more environmentalist antagonists at the provincial and federal level.

The Community Communications Centre functioned as an outreach centre rather than an institute, remaining autonomous from the college, but operating out of a trailer shared with other college facilities. Credit: Management Committee File, CCC, Kwantlen Polytechnic University Archives, Surrey.

"Show one story on the front page of the year that you can say relates to something that happened in one classroom…on this campus!" Credit: Still from *Save our Farmland* video, STEP 1 Program, ¾ inch cassette, R/G15 Accession No. 86-5, Box 1 Kwantlen Polytechnic University Archives, Surrey.

The Surrey Project

While Pinney's film *Some People Have to Suffer* is the only public artifact surviving the formal presence of the Challenge for Change program in Surrey between 1973 and 1976, in fact the Surrey Project had a much more comprehensive impact. And it endured much longer than might have been expected given the conservative turn taken by provincial politics as the seventies faded into the corporate eighties. This was owed in part to how the project was initially set up, through a partnership with the newly established, multi-campus Douglas College, as well as to how the social animators integrated the NFB's mandate into the ethos of community development that they already embraced. The project's first objective was to establish a "Community Communications Centre," to be housed in one of the temporary trailers that served as classrooms and administrative buildings on the new campus. Reluctant at first to make a commitment, the College Board members were invited to a presentation by geography professor Jim Sellers, who would soon be hired as a social animator:

> "In that meeting, when we first got the College to realize that they had to continue on when the [National Film] Board withdrew [...]we took 52 front pages of the Surrey Leader newspaper, put them up in the room, and we had all the [College] Board members walk around and we asked them after it was over, 'Show one story on the front page of the year that you can say relates to something that happened in one classroom at one time on this campus!' And nobody could say that there was anything that we were teaching that was relevant to the front page stories of the community[...]. So how was it a *community* college?"[14] [open endnotes in new window]

If Douglas College was to function truly as a "classroom without walls," to "make sure the living rooms of the community are the classrooms of the college," Sellers argued that the NFB Challenge for Change process, "a really important way of democratizing learning," could be used as a tool to achieve that goal (Driscoll and Sellers, March, 2010).

The Community Communications Center served as a headquarters from which the Surrey Project animators offered workshops in how to use the new Sony VTR Port-a-pak technology, edited half-inch videotapes they had taken, and helped citizens strategize about how best to bring attention to the issues that most concerned them.[15] With generous funding from the Provincial government (Victoria committed $29,000 to the project in June of 1974, for instance),[16] Pinney hired local personnel to work as social animators for the program. In addition to Sellers, former air charter entrepreneur Jim Gillis was brought on board primarily for his skills at gaining the confidence of the business-minded mayor and council members. Gillis recalls being shown a video camera for the first time, with its cutting-edge capacity to play back a scene that had just been recorded, and recognizing its value as a "marketing" tool for selling a citizen-based point of view to decision makers in government. From his perspective as a businessman mediating between residents and policy-makers who might be at odds over the details and desirability of industrial development, deploying video was a matter of "selling" a position on a given issue.[17] Gillis helped hire Norma Taite, an artist who with her husband Ted was building a house in South Surrey and was looking for a way to become more involved in her community. Gillis, Taite, and Sellers continued with the program until well after the NFB pulled out and Chris Pinney

CFC Surrey Project animators Norma Taite and Jim Gillis discuss Bridgeview and other community issues on a demonstration tape made to request further funding for the Community Communications Centre in the late seventies. Credit: This image and the next one from CCC Demo #1, ¾ inch cassette, R/G15 Accession No. 86-5, Box 1. Kwantlen Polytechnic Library Archives.

CFC Surrey Project animator Jim Sellers discusses Surrey land use issues with his colleagues.

returned East. After 1976, the activities of the Community Communications Centre expanded to include some of the Douglas College campuses in other municipalities, and another animator, David Driscoll, was hired from the college faculty.

The social animators kept abreast of local land use issues by combing the local newspapers, attending all municipal council meetings, and showing up at the meetings of local citizens' groups.[18] Their Community Communications Centre quickly gained public visibility, so that citizens began to show up at the trailer asking for assistance. There was almost no locality in the 122 square mile municipality where the Surrey Project was not in some way involved.

Local initiatives included helping residents form a co-op to take over their "poorly maintained and managed apartment" building—but also to make a video of the process to share their experience with tenants in another part of the municipality, and to bring it to City Hall in an effort to "get a bylaw passed that [would] ensure the proper maintenance of apartment buildings in Surrey" (Pinney, Report, August 1975).

In the Big Bend and Port Kells areas, both bordering the Fraser River, the CFC animators helped local residents make concise videos addressing proposals for landfill, oil refinery, and industrial parks in the area. As one report noted:

> "The Bend [...] is one of the fresh water marshes on the Fraser River and is a unique ecological and recreational area. Surrey [Council], however, is considering a plan to industrialize the bend, and the area has also been chosen as a prime site for a sanitary landfill by the Greater Vancouver Regional District. Working with the environmental institute of Douglas College and with the industrial development officer for Surrey, we completed a tape in September outlining the ecological considerations and the industrial proposals for the area." (Pinney, Report, September/October 1975)

These industrial proposals were a clear example of the sort of "service" role Vancouver sought to assign to Surrey and other municipalities south of the Fraser River, as the GVRD plan took shape. As a result of several citizen-based presentations about the area, the council was persuaded to oppose the sanitary landfill, though industrial development along the foreshore remained a bone of contention for years to come.[19]
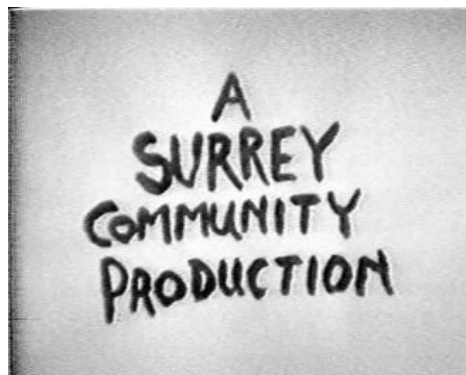
Opening title page for a process video protesting the rezoning of the Port Kells district of Surrey from residential to industrial. Credit: This and next two images from CCC Demo #2, ¾ inch cassette, R/G15 Accession No. 86-5, Box 1. Kwantlen Polytechnic Library Archives.

"Don't it always seem to go, that you don't know what you've got till it's gone…" Process videos often included cartoon figures dramatizing a given problem, with accompanying music or explanatory voiceover.

Host of *Land: The Industrial Problem* interviews residents near the proposed rezoning area. Process videos like this were often shown in council chambers, or even in Victoria, to persuade officials to reconsider development schemes such as the one protested here.
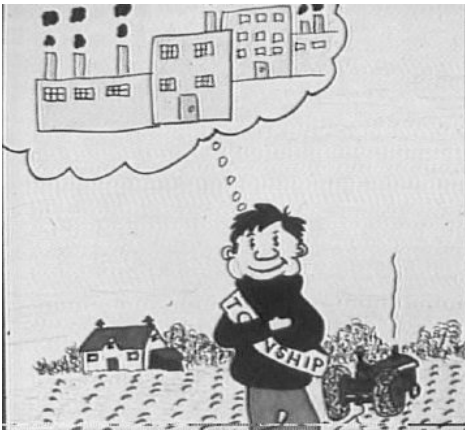

This still image from *Some People Have to Suffer* shows the kind of video footage provided by social animators of council meetings. The film projector was probably brought into chambers to show 16mm film footage of an issue in contention.


[Sound of toilet flushing] "Is our Farmland going down the drain?" Opening salvo of a process video to save BC's agricultural land by preventing developers from removing parcels from the ALR. This was shown during the Satellite Tele-Education Program experiment to deliver education via satellite in B.C. Credit: This and following images from STEP 1 NFB Step (Part 1) Record Date: 15/12/1977, ¾ inch cassette, R/G15 Accession No. 86-5, Box 1. Kwantlen Polytechnic Library Archives.

On another front, Surrey Project animators helped citizens' delegations prepare media briefs to persuade council to avert a proposed petro-chemical plant in the Hazelmere Valley, in South Surrey. By this time, the social animators were providing closed-circuit television coverage of the council meetings for the crowds of residents unable to pack into the chambers (Pinney, Report, June/July 1975). This led, eventually, to coverage of council meetings for local cable television. Indeed, compelling the local cable stations to adhere to the Canadian Radio-Television Commission's mandate to provide public access to the airwaves was another of the Surrey Project's successful campaigns.

Pinney also participated in the Satellite Tele-Education Program (S.T.E.P.), a pioneering effort to deliver college education via satellite, bringing together social animators around the province to broadcast some of the process videos made under the auspices of the CFC. Programming included clips from *Some People Have to Suffer* (as an example of community planning); and two slide-show videos (videotaped still images accompanied by music and voiceover), one about attempts to save the Seven Sister's mountain range from being heavily logged and the other about the importance of preserving agricultural areas in B.C., with tips on how to prevent parcels of farmland from being sold and developed. Broadcasts of the film and process videos were followed by call-in sessions, during which residents from far-flung corners of the province talked with Pinney and other animators in the studio.

Save our Farmland video: Graphic showing Chilliwack township contemplating the economic advantages of selling out to industry.

"One basic problem is that Chilliwack has two governments, the city and the township."
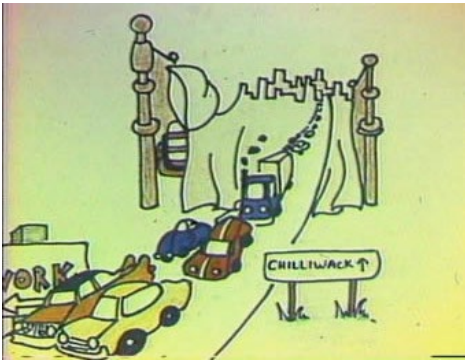
Save our Farmland video: if it sells off parcels of farmland for residential growth, Chilliwack becomes a bedroom community for Vancouver. Voiceover: "Do we really need a bigger population?"

Save our Farmland video: slide of landscape marked to show the various land classes, including farmland in the ALR.

Voiceover: "We have the advantage of a largely unspoiled region and we must take a long hard look at other people's experiences before we formulate our own land policy."

Viewers from around the province phone in to discuss the process videos demonstrating B.C.'s land use issues.From left to right: Unknown (host of the show), Christopher Pinney, Jim Gillis, Alice Wilcox, and Dr. Henry Hightower, Professor at UBC School of Community and Regional Planning.

Despite the CFC program's origins with the National *Film* Board, if a form of media other than moving images seemed more effective, then social animators did not hesitate to develop it in aid of the citizens who sought their assistance. This was true of a pamphlet they designed to arm the ordinary citizen against developers (and the politicians who catered to them) who had figured out how to exploit the loopholes in the Agricultural Land Reserve. As soon as the Act was passed, recalls
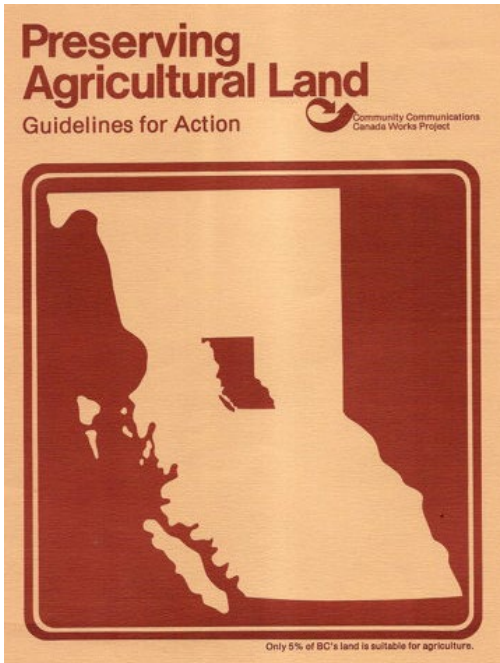
Where appropriate, Surrey Project animators used media other than film and video to work toward community goals. Cover of a handbook designed to help the average citizen prevent nearby land from being removed from the ALR by others seeking to make a profit. The small image of B.C. in the middle of the larger outline of the province represents the percentage of land appropriate for agriculture in B.C.

In *Some People Have to Suffer*, contaminated effluent seeps into the rainwater in ditches fronting the houses of Bridgeview.

David Driscoll, "it was immediately assailed by the development industry, and continues to be assailed by development industry:" applications for exemptions flooded the Land Commission, as various parties sought to redevelop farmland for profit motives.[20] Perceiving that only informed citizens could counter this manipulation of the Land Commission's aims, the Community Communications Center produced and distributed "Preserving Agricultural Land: Guidelines for Action," a ten-page handbook outlining how the average citizen might participate in the protection of endangered agricultural land in their jurisdiction. The flyer opened with a list of the kinds of parties "applying to have the land removed from the ALR": the developer, the speculator, the government (from municipal right up to federal and crown corporations), and the farmer. "By the time the average citizen has become aware that land may be taken out of the Agricultural Land Reserve" the pamphlet warned, developers and speculators will have already contacted local government, and started the wheels rolling even before the issue is raised at a regular council meeting. With the backing of the local council (often eager to benefit from perceived gains to be made by commercial or industrial development of a tract of farmland) the case is then taken to the Land Commission, "and now it is public," the handbook remarks.

> "Or is it public knowledge? There is no guarantee the newspaper will report a request for support from council on an appeal to exclude land from the ALR or on an appeal to the Land Commission. Council meetings must be attended by yourself or members of your group. The Land Commission will provide interested citizens with a schedule of up-coming appeals. Even better than waiting until the issue is public, if you have regular contact with elected officials or government bureaucrats, they will often warn you of up-coming issues."

The pamphlet offered clear advice about how to anticipate the various tactics developers might use to convince authorities that removing farmland from the ALR will be for the "public good," "even if the prime motivating factor is private profit." The citizen was advised to

> "analyze the arguments and carefully distinguish between public good and a private profit. If it is a government department making the appeal, there may be private interests who will profit."

Readers of the pamphlet were even coached in Saul Alinsky-style strategies for winning their political battle: being prepared to anticipate the opposition's arguments, learning not to stray from the central issue, and knowing what traits make a "skilled spokesperson" for their cause.[21]

Some People Have to Suffer

One of the most complex land use problems to have been mediated by the Surrey Project was that documented in Pinney's film *Some People Have to Suffer*. While the social animators consider this film to be "only the tip of the iceberg" where their work in Surrey was concerned, it nevertheless serves as a kind of paradigmatic example of how the local council operated, and what any citizen-based movement was up against.

In the early years of its establishment as a residential neighborhood, because of its proximity to the riverfront, Bridgeview was considered to be a desirable place to homestead. But by the 1950s, its attractiveness had declined, in part because it had become encircled by industry, in part because it lacked the sewer systems that had been provided to other residential areas throughout the municipality. Because of the boggy ground along the river's edge, residents' original septic tanks began to fail, causing contaminated effluent to seep into the rainwater run-off ditches that fronted their ranch style houses and bungalows. Indeed, as Jim Sellers puts it, the city assured

"Let's say we have put about $16,000 just on material in this place, because we did most of the work ourselves… and they tell us our property is worth about $400 in assessment." The Wittenbergs discuss the forced devaluation of their property.

Social Animators videotaped Bridgeview Committee meetings to keep track of developments over the several years the sewering issue was in contention. The footage was later used by Pinney for *Some People*.

The role of social animators was made visible in Challenge for Change films like *VTR St Jacques*. Here social animators are shown videotaping interviews with local residents in Montreal.

"deliberate degrading of the drainage system by not cleaning the ditches and fixing dyke gates. It was a willful neglect intended to render the drainage system dysfunctional" (Sellers, e-mail, 10/21/2011).

Council had promised to provide sewers in the fifties, but delayed for over twenty years, and so it was that by the time the Challenge for Change Program arrived, the Bridgeview residents, still with the same leaky septic tanks, found themselves on the verge of eviction from their own homes, homes into which many had sunk their life's savings.

The Surrey Project worked closely with two of Bridgeview's community leaders, Otto Wittenberg and Alice Wilcox, who featured in Pinney's film about the neighborhood's struggle. Over three years, Norma Taite, Jim Gillis, and Jim Sellers attended and videotaped Bridgeview committee meetings, council meetings, and a crucial meeting with representatives from the Provincial Government. Meanwhile, Chris Pinney and his staff filmed formal interviews (in color 16mm) with residents, Surrey administrative officials, Mayor Vander Zalm and some of the aldermen. By 1976, as the NFB was preparing to hand off the Community Communications Centre to Douglas College and its local administrators, Pinney completed the film, just in time to screen it at the UN Habitat for Humanity Conference being held in Vancouver that summer. After viewing the film, Pinney recalls, conferees were invited to take an hour's bus ride to visit the rat-infested ditches of Bridgeview in person, and bear witness to the embarrassing fact that the "third world" that Habitat had been discussing, as though it were half a globe away, could be found only twenty miles from the conference site (Conversation with Pinney, 12/18/2009).

Like two other films made under the auspices of the Challenge for Change program, *Some People Have to Suffer* served to showcase some of the process video footage that was generated by social animators and their constituencies. *VTR St Jacques* (Bonnie Klein, 1969) and *VTR Rosedale* (Len Chatwin, 1974) each depict the presence of social animators in an economically depressed area (an impoverished district of Montreal and an ailing Alberta mining community, respectively), detailing how they organized and shot footage of meetings at which local residents identified their most pressing problems, how these same residents were trained to use the VTR equipment, and how this citizen-produced footage functioned to bring about significant change in the area. The agency of the CFC social animators is obvious in these short films—we can see how their intervention played a role in changing the local citizens' sense of their power as a political group, and their growing control over decision-making processes that would affect their lives.

In the case of *Some People*, however, Pinney focused on the drama as it unfolded among the Bridgeview residents, elected officials, and Surrey planning administrators such as the town manager, the industrial planner, and the municipal engineer. Jim Gillis, Norma Taite, and Jim Sellers worked behind the scenes,

- demonstrating "the usefulness of media in [the] struggle to upgrade and preserve their community," then "passing these media skills on" to the residents (Pinney to Wallace, letter, 10/16/1974);
- researching "alternative solutions" to the "traditional high cost sewage system" that had been rejected by council (Pinney, Report, January 1975);
- "working with the residents in their efforts to put pressure on the government and to bring the problem to broader public attention" and

- drawing the attention of CBC's Newshour to cover the story for a mainstream audience (Pinney, Report, September/October 1975).

When the municipal and provincial governments disagreed about how best to resolve the sewering issue, the Surrey Project shrewdly helped residents do some nitty-gritty sleuthing:

> "To try and get down to the reality of the difference between the provincial and municipal proposals, we are now helping the residents to organize an investigation of all land purchases and turnover in Bridgeview in the last ten years. This should soon show whether or not land speculators will be, as the province says, the prime beneficiaries of the municipal program." (Pinney, Report, September/October 1975)

But in *Some People* social animators are not shown; instead we see a community already trained and active in the pursuit of their goals, as in this shot, where Bridgeview residents challenge the mayor and aldermen at a packed council meeting.

But it would appear that Pinney made the decision to foreground the battle between city officials and the citizens themselves, rather than the mediating role of the Surrey Project. As a result, Taite, Sellers, and Gillis are not depicted in the film, either in their organizing capacity or in their role as media instructors. We see instead a community already trained and active in the pursuit of their goals, challenging the local bureaucrats to bring about long overdue changes to their physical environment. This narrative has two consequences. First, it means that viewers of the film get no glimpse of the local social animators in action, and thus no sense of the methodological process by which the Challenge for Change program made a difference in what unfolded during the mid-seventies in this neighborhood that typified how land use conflicts intersected with class struggles. But it also means that the residents themselves are not shown in an epistemologically inferior position vis-à-vis the NFB and its agents, in need of guidance and direction.[22] Rather, if anything, the camera is turned on the bureaucrats as they are made to "confess" (directly or indirectly) their own implication in Bridgeview's land use woes.

In *Some People*, the camera is turned on the bureaucrats as they are made to confess their implication in Bridgeview's land woes.

Concerned no doubt to construct a coherent narrative out of a complex, many-faceted political situation that had unfolded over a long period of time, Pinney structured the film fairly conventionally, opening with an aerial shot to establish Bridgeview's geographical locale, and following with talking heads, video documentary footage of council and committee meetings during which the protagonists and their antagonists are shown in conflict with each other, and descriptive color sequences illustrating the land under contestation, houses in need of repair, overflowing ditches, proximity to the river, and industrial encroachment.

In 1966 health authorities put a freeze on any future residential development, which meant that eight years later, this homeowner was still trying to get a permit to finish his house.

This shot shows the proximity of residential housing to one of the industries in Bridgeview, a lumberyard. Though the Pattullo Bridge forms a nice backdrop from further up the hill, it is rarely visible from any of the homes in Bridgeview.

Boyce Richardson, an NFB documentarist in his own right, provides a voiceover that functions less like the kind of "voice-of-god" narration that had fallen into disfavor by this era of verité-style filmmaking, and more like the discursive mortar that holds the disparate building-blocks of the film together. Insofar as *Some People* was intended as a kind of "animator" film—that is, a tool not so much of instruction as of instigation—Richardson's voice extends matter-of-fact advice for the would-be citizen activist. Besides offering vocal "establishing shots" and economically filling in backstory details through an audio-montage, it describes the developing strategies of the citizens as they press forward with their demands, and provides suggestive hints about how the viewer might follow suit. It also functions as an ironic bridge, linking something said in an interview to a wryly chosen successive shot—as when, for example, Mayor Vander Zalm ponders whether the Bridgeview area might be better suited to "other purposes," after which Richardson informs us that "other purposes turned out to be industry" as we transition from the Mayor's rosy-cheeked face to the iconic shot of a bulldozer dredging mud up at the river's edge. Generally, the voiceover supplies a kind of present pluperfect, from which the complex series of unfolding events and interviews can be narrativized.

 The Mayor and council members are introduced by one of the aldermen, self-styled working-class hero Ed McKitka who opens with the pronouncement that Surrey is a "two hundred million a year" business. Although he doesn't object to "everyone getting involved," he wonders what his fellow council-members, themselves businessmen, have to contribute. As the film unfolds, it would seem, indeed, as if these "small town politicians" (in the words of the voiceover) conform fairly closely to the picture given by Molotch of the "special sort of person" who becomes "involved" in government "for reasons of land business and related processes of resource distribution." What is extraordinary about the film is how deftly Pinney, with the behind-the-scenes help of his social animators, brings into

Alderman ED McKITKA
Construction Contractor

Self-styled working-class hero Alderman Ed McKitka wonders what his fellow council-members have to offer the city of Surrey.

public discourse what Vander Zalm and his colleagues might have wished to remain hidden—or at least neglected long enough that eventually the neighborhood in Bridgeview would deteriorate to the point that residents would be forced (because of health issues) to evacuate, leaving the district to be completely industrialized.

In black-and-white video footage taken by social animators, the mayor tries to make a point during a Bridgeview community meeting.

"Who put the freeze on us?" asks an angry Bridgeview resident.

Three scenes worth emphasizing

In a blurry black-and-white video sequence, shots of the Mayor, spluttering as he tries to defend himself at a Bridgeview committee meeting, are edited with a shot of a community member who emerges from the exasperated crowd to confront him. The camera returns to the Mayor for a reaction shot, jerkily zooming in to capture his uncertain face. This was the sort of footage salvaged from hours of process videos shot by the animators, and giving a feel of immediacy to the story as it unfolded. As the sequence concludes, dejected residents rising from their seats to disperse, the voice of Alderman Fred Beale is heard to comment that although the people "down there" are to be commended for their "*esprit de corps,*" he is looking at it from the point of view of the municipality as a whole.

> "Unfortunately when you do something in a municipality of this size, some people have to suffer, and it may be in this case that the people of Bridgeview have to suffer."

At one point, Pinney interviews Wittenberg and Wilcox on a vacant lot near their neighborhood. Wittenberg refers to a map he has showing "umpteen dozens of holding companies that have bought in here […] all the biggies." When Pinney comments that the area is not supposed to be worth anything, Wittenberg agrees and adds,

> "But then the mayor's turned around, or not the mayor himself, but his brother, and they bought this piece of property that we're standing on, and they paid the fantastic price of a hundred thousand dollars for it."

Wilcox adds that she didn't think any land in Bridgeview was of that value, "because everyone has told us the land *has* no value, and the sooner people move out, the better it will be for them." This sequence is followed by a nonchalant Vander Zalm defending the rights of "these real estate people" to "go in there" since the land was a good investment. "That's the system, it's permitted, it's allowed." But whether in fact "this is council's fault, no, I don't agree," he concludes, as though the "real estate people" and the council members are unrelated to each other.

In another scene, the camera pans from water lapping at a pebbly shore up to a mill surrounded by trucks, a chaos of loose logs, and a looming gravel pit. Wittenberg is heard to comment on how what used to be beautiful has been made ugly by industrial development. As his face comes into view, he announces that the people of Bridgeview want to

> "preserve this area for the people of Surrey to use for

The mayor seems at a loss to answer the question.

After the meeting, Alderman Fred Beale remarks that "some people have to suffer" in a municipality of this size—and in this case, it may be Bridgeview that has to suffer.

Community leaders Otto Wittenberg and Alice Wilcox remark that the mayor's brother has bought lots in Bridgeview for "the fantastic price of a hundred thousand dollars," while at the same time, residents were told that "the land

fishing or other recreational uses because it's actually the only piece of Fraser River foreshore where an access for the people could be made to the river."

Scenes such as this contradict the assumption that class and environmental politics are necessarily at odds. In this case, at least, the working class residents of Bridgeview were fighting not only for their own basic services but for a cleaner waterfront that would benefit the whole municipality. In a rejoinder to Beale's earlier remark, the residents of Bridgeview are here recast not as those who would have to "suffer" for the good of the larger community, but as the vanguard of a movement to save the Fraser River (and those who lived south of it) from an industrial demise.

Overall, the dramatic tension of *Some People* depends on the question of whether the community will get their sewers. Beyond that, the question of social change involves the extent to which these same citizens, and others like them (presumably future audiences of the film) will have learned how to take the most effective role in government decision-making processes in the future.

However, to the extent that the film also reveals the self-serving motivations and actions of local politicians, who in this case seem to be invested in the promotion of industrial development at all costs (and to be profiting from it), one must also ask whether the "social change" sought by the film includes changes in the behavior of elected officials, and their relationship to developers and land speculators. Though it might seem naïve to hope that local government will "change," that is, consider the long term impact of encroaching on the natural and agricultural resources of the municipality (and the province), then at least the goal of a film like *Some People* might perhaps be to inform the average citizen about the complexities of what they have to contend with—i.e. how best to evaluate the true interests of their elected officials (see through their public statements) and then figure out how to influence them to respond to the needs even of the least privileged of their constituencies.

Subsequent historical events lent an additional ironic tang to the film for B.C. viewers who happened to see it: Vander Zalm became premier of the province in 1986, and for the next five years chipped away at many of the environmentally sound land use innovations instituted by the NDP in the seventies.

Conclusion

One might ask whether a film like *Some People Have to Suffer* amounts to nothing more than coaching low-income homeowners to compete with the NIMBY[23] [open endnotes in new window] tactics

has no value, and the sooner people move out, the better."

The camera pans from the river to a mill surrounded by trucks, a chaos of loose logs, and a gravel pit—what "used to be beautiful" is made ugly by industrial development, remarks Wittenberg.

OTTO WITTENBERG
Bridgeview Spokesman

"We the people of Bridgeview want to preserve this area for the people of Surrey to use for fishing or other recreational uses." Class and environmental politics converge as the working class residents are recast not as those who must suffer, but as the vanguard of a movement to save the Fraser River.

engaged by more well-heeled citizens. That the Surrey Land Use Project sought to go beyond the immediate problem of how to keep undesirable development out of one's own backyard is reflected in Pinney's plans for subsequent film projects. In a report anticipating the third and final phase of the project, Pinney described its "most important objective" as the development of "a series of films designed to provide an overview on land management." These films would cover:

- the citizen and citizen participation planning
- government, particularly the role of municipal and regional government
- the planner and the formal planning process
- the developer, the speculator, land development by the private sector (Pinney to Hay, April 28, 1975)

Bringing out the "structural relationship" among the various constituencies involved, the films were to provide "communities throughout Canada with a perspective on the dynamics of land use planning." *Some People* was meant, thus, to be the first in this series, whose goal would be to make visible, as Molotch would put it, the very "distributive matters" ("who, *in material terms*, gets what, where, and how") that are normally kept out of public discourse (Molotch, 313). Regrettably, his ambitious proposal never came to fruition, as the Challenge for Change program wound down and funds dried up.

Pinney and his colleagues made certain that the Community Communications Centre would outlive the NFB's initial presence at Douglas College, however, continuing to serve the needs of the local citizenry. This they did by structuring it, from the beginning, as an "outreach center" rather than an institute, and stressing that it "must be perceived as a catalytic action-oriented facility that is interested in helping people define their own priorities and interests" (Pinney to Day, 18 April 1975, letter p.2). The CCC would continue to draw from college resources and faculty expertise but remain autonomous from its formal administrative and curricular structure.[24] Under the directorship of Jim Gillis, the CCC continued its operations until 1983, when it was dissolved and many of its activities subsumed under the auspices of the Continuing Education Program, which Gillis also directed.[25]

The land use mandate of the project was kept alive by Norma Taite and Barry Leach, founder of the Institute for Environmental Studies at Douglas College. Together, they produced a six-part video series that explored the history of the Fraser River, and argued for measures that would reverse the industrial damage being done to it. Thanks to the groundwork already established by the Challenge for Change program, they secured co-sponsorship for the series from several local cable stations, each of which aired the final program in 1978.

Working from the Community Communications Center, Taite, Sellers, Gillis and Driscoll drifted away from a strict focus on land use issues, and even from the practice of "social animation" insofar as it entailed the rallying and empowerment of discrete citizens' groups. Projects included a video titled "Cheryl Rides a Pony," for use as a training device in the therapeutic riding movement, and another video
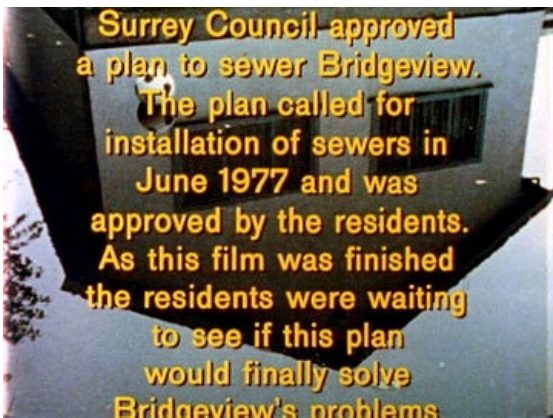
Though the film was finished by 1976, the saga of the sewers dragged on for another couple of years, as Vander Zalm was elected to the provincial government as Minister of Human Resources (and later as Premier) and Ed McKitka became Mayor of Surrey.
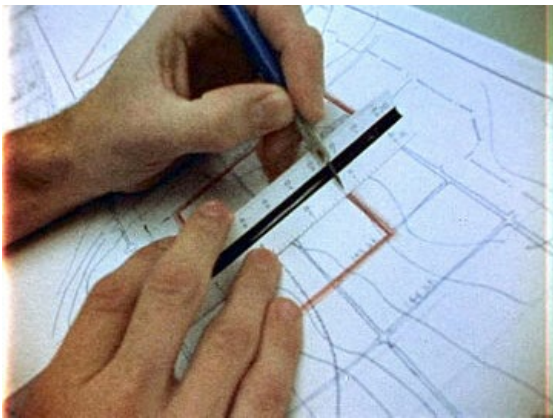
This brief shot from the Surrey Planning office gestures toward the never realized films Pinney had intended to make about the formal planning process in local government.

demonstrating the need for wheelchair access in all public arenas. What they see now as one of their most valuable accomplishments has little to do with "fighting city hall," and more with private social enterprise: the development of a series of large cards with images and words, for use by teachers and other educators to help children recognize (and report) inappropriate touching. Called "C.A.R.E." (Child Abuse Research and Education, or in its most recent guise, "Challenge Abuse through Respect Education") the program grew from a locally implemented educational packet to an internationally distributed kit, including instructional videos for teachers and original song recordings for children, and self-funded through marketing to institutions (most recently, the Red Cross and the Catholic Church). Interestingly, Sellers and Driscoll see the Community Communications Centre, in retrospect, as "an animation center that became what in small business you call an incubation center […] for social enterprise" (Driscoll, Interview, 2010). Jim Sellers notes in retrospect:

> "What was truly remarkable [about C.A.R.E.] is that elected representatives of all the major political parties and agencies left, right, and centre (including the RCMP) were equally involved in its development." (E-mail, 10/21/2011).

The shift in terminology to terms like "social enterprise" mirrors a more generalized shift in approach to "social change" as the decades unfolded: from an era of Saul Alinsky-style grassroots organizing, where citizens' groups were trained in how to confront elected officials who might not have their best interests in mind, to a more recent era dominated by privately developed social enterprise projects. Small-scale local animation, you might say, was being supplanted by social initiatives that sought to compete in the global marketplace. Even Chris Pinney has shifted away from his grassroots filmmaking days; when I tracked him down in 2010, he was the Director of Research and Policy at the Boston College Center for Corporate Citizenship.[26]

But the Surrey Project's early focus on land use is still relevant even today, as the term "Vancouverism" has come, for some urban planners and architects, to represent an ideal of city planning, at once livable and sustainable.[27] The story of the Challenge for Change program in Surrey suggests that "Vancouverism" may inevitably rely for its sustainability on a nearby "Surreyism"—that is, a suburban service area whose political custodians too readily cater not only to developers eager for a profit, but to a more urban metropolitan neighbor seeking to distance itself from the less appetizing, but necessary components of sustainable city living. In the words of one urban geographer:

> "the contention that Vancouver represents an urban paradise is not without challenge […]. Major concerns around growing income inequality, lack of affordable housing, uncertain economic prospects and a large ecological footprint raise questions around its sustainability and whether all of its citizens find it so lovable.

Furthermore, outside of the City of Vancouver, much of the metropolitan region resembles the sprawling, automobile-focused development found elsewhere in North America." (Owens, 3)[28]

What remains valuable today in the Challenge for Change project in Surrey is not only that an oppressed people came to find their voice through self-representation; nor even that they were able to objectify the officials who were exploiting them. Nor was it that during the official presence of the NFB in Surrey, dozens of citizens' groups solved their most pressing immediate social and material problems (indeed, Bridgeview did, after all, get sewers, though forty years later, they are again in need of replacement).[29] Rather, it was, as Jim Sellers has noted, that local citizens continued for at least another ten years to enjoy access to the know-how, resources, and expertise necessary to take an ongoing role in the decision-making processes regarding the very "livability" of their natural and built environment, precisely because

> "Pinney and Clemson and CFC had the foresight to get their process vested in the community via the college, creating the CCC [Community Communications Center]. As it embedded itself, it evolved to serve other community needs. By lasting a decade, this 'experiment' in activist-participant media moved beyond being just an experiment." (Sellers, e-mail, 10/21/2011).

Intervening in the larger issues of urban planning for this very desirable West Coast region, the Surrey Project managed to reveal the hidden mechanism of suburban growth, provided its constituents with the tools to make clear who was served by it, and who was expected to "suffer" as a consequence. What we might bring into the present moment is the insight that technological advances in digital media do not necessarily bring with them the power to discern, in all its complexity, what is wrong with one's world, and the expertise to redress it. For this, one needs the kind of human intervention provided by the Surrey Project's animators, and (just as importantly) the material resources to support them.

Go to Notes page

Notes

1. "Social animation," translated from the French "animation sociale," was a community development movement designed by Michel Blondin in Quebec in the 1960s. Drawing from Saul Alinsky-style confrontation tactics, social animators worked with local constituencies to target pressing social and political issues, then trained citizens in pressure techniques to bring about desired changes (Turner, 77). Because the term was so widespread and commonly used during the Challenge for Change program, I will retain it in my discussion here, despite its shift in recent years to denote the animation of still images in film and video production. For a discussion of the survival of the older meaning of the term, see the entry on "animateurs, animation, learning and change" in the encyclopedia of informal education:
http://www.infed.org/animate/b-animat.htm
[return to page 1 of essay]

2. Marie Kurchak, "What Challenge? What Change?" *Canadian Film Reader*, Eds Seth Feldman and Joyce Nelson, Toronto: Peter Martin Assoc. Ltd, 1977, p. 121. Reprinted from *Take One*, 4:1 (September-October 1972).

3. Waugh, Thomas, Michael Brendan Baker, and Ezra Winton, eds, *Challenge for Change: Activist Documentary at the National Film Board of Canada*, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010. See Lyell Davies' "Challenge for Change and Participatory Filmmaking" in *Jump Cut* 53 for a review of this book, and some images of the films that came out of the NFB project.

4. For explorations of these questions, and more, see the excellent essays in Waugh et al, *Challenge for Change*. For an interesting update on the Fogo project, see Lisa Moore, "Rock Haven", in *Canadianart*, 28:3 (Fall 2011), 124-8.

5. Pinney, "The B.C. Land Use Project," R/G 15, ACC# 86-04, Box 8, File 1, Kwantlen Polytechnic Library Archives, Surrey. This document is undated, but references to contemporary events allow it to be dated to sometime in 1973, as the project was getting started.

6. Donald Gutstein, *Vancouver Ltd*. Toronto: James Lorimer and Co, 1975, 11.
[return to page 2]

7. I owe special gratitude to political theorist Serena Kataoka for alerting me to the work of these scholars, and to the importance of the scholarship on urban politics of the seventies to understanding the NFB's intervention in

Surrey. Her dissertation "Civil Cities: Urban Myths for a Suburban Scene" (University of Victoria, 2011) takes Bridgeview as an extended case study in a trenchant analysis of how Jane Jacobs has figured in the politics of Vancouver's urban development. While we reach many of the same conclusions about the "service" role played by Surrey in relation to Vancouver, she offers a much more extended account of Bridgeview through the decades than I am able to in this essay.

8. Molotch, Harvey, "The City as Growth Machine: Toward a Political Economy of Place," *The American Journal of Sociology*, 82:2 (September 1976), 309-332.

9. Indeed, as Serena Kataoka has observed, Lorimer's1972 book *A Citizen's Guide to City Politics* (where he develops the notion of "the property industry,") is considered by many to be an under-recognized precursor to Molotch. (Kataoka, e-mail, 8/23/2011)

10. Lorimer, James, *The Developers*, Toronto: James Lorimer and Company, 1978.

11. As quoted in Cameron Owens, "Challenges in Evaluating Livability in Vancouver, Canada," (Case study prepared for Planning Sustainable Cities: Global Report on Human Settlements 2009, available from http://www.unhabitat.org/grhs/2009), p.6.

12. Lorimer quotes from Harry N. Lash, *Planning in a Human Way: Personal reflections on the regional planning experience in Greater Vancouver*. (Toronto: Macmillan, Urban Prospects series, 1976), p. 61. Lorimer was quoting from a manuscript of the book.

13. The animators characterize the Surrey Project as having a "disconnect" from the "federal or provincial politics as it played out in the lower mainland." They stress rather that is was "grounded in the community" and had more to do with local issues (Conversation with Sellers, Gillis, Driscoll, March 26, 2010). This does not mean, however, that insight cannot be gained by contextualizing the "local" issues within the larger political picture, as I am seeking to do here. Jim Sellers adds:

> "we found ourselves involved in advancing, in some way or other/more or less, *social justice* (in its very broadest connotation). Nor were we ignorant of, nor dismissive of, the larger political context(s) that funded, aided, reacted to, or resisted our efforts. Enabling marginalized communities of interest to empower themselves to find remedy for their situation—be it homeowners wallowing in sewage or children threatened with sexual abuse seemed to me what it was "all about" for us and those we chose to work with." (Sellers, e-mail, 10/21/2011).

14. Jim Sellers, Conversation with Sellers, Gillis, and Driscoll, March 26, 2010. [return to page 3]

15. The animators were themselves trained in the new video technology by

NFB practitioners Moira (Mo) Simpson and Liz Walker. Simpson recollects that she and Walker

> "would drive out to Surrey [from Vancouver] and give portapack workshops at a time when we were still learning the technology ourselves. We visited Bridgeview and became familiar with the neighbourhood but we were definitely on the outside."

> "Yet our connection to the project and working with Metro Media (which was linked to Challenge for Change) informed my entire life. I'm still helping people develop the skills to tell their own stories—whether it's in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside using mobile phones, in the slums of Kenya or with the youth of New Denver, who are currently working on a community media project remembering the Internment of the Japanese during the war in the New Denver Nikkei Internment Camp." (Facebook Correspondence, 1 April 2010)

16. Letter from Ernest Hall, B.C. Provincial Secretary, to Christopher Pinney, June 27th, 1974, Douglas College Library Archives, New Westminster.

17. Dave Driscoll points out that, aside from the technical expertise, citizens who were trained in video editing were receiving an education in critical thinking—something that helped the CFC Surrey Project justify its partnership with the Community College:

> "One of the things really critical in terms of adult education was [...] how do people learn to structure their thinking? And the use of video was a key element in obliging a discipline of thought. So we would meet with some groups and they would say, ok who wants to yell, 'all right you bunch of assholes up there?' Okay, you can yell that now and you can film it for a couple minutes. Okay now you've got three minutes, are we going to put that in the video? No, it doesn't really make our case. So what makes our case? [We were teaching] a discipline of efficiency, economy of argument. [We'd say] 'don't raise that argument because it opens the door for a rejoinder' [...] so it was teaching the structure of thought, the structure of representation, visual literacy, what has power, economy of argument, it teaches all those professional disciplines that are well known in law and a number of other professions. [...] I think that that was the key part of education that the college understood and respected." (Driscoll, 6/23/10)

18. Norma Taite, Conversation with Taite and Gillis, June 21, 2011.

19. A June 1980 memo from Gillis, outlining the activities of the CCC after the NFB pulled out, notes that the center "helped to organize a number of communities to speak against industry in their community. These problems were resolved in Surrey and gave birth to community planning committees. However, the G.V.R.D., in their Livable Region Plan, had placed the Industrial Zones back into the plan, and the fight is on again in earnest." (Memo, Gillis to Doerr, June 5, 1980, Management Committee File, CCC, Kwantlen

Polytechnic University Archives, Surrey).

20. Dave Driscoll, Conversation with Jim Sellers, Jim Gillis, and Dave Driscoll, March 26, 2010.

21. It is worth noting that under the auspices of the Challenge for Change program, the NFB made a multi-part documentary about Saul Alinsky's organizing tactics, both in the States and in Canada. These films were distributed as training tools for social animators and community organizers as the program continued to unfold in the seventies. Peter Pearson and Bonnie Sherr Klein, 1967.
http://www.nfb.ca/film/encounter_with_saul_alinsky_part_1
http://www.nfb.ca/film/encounter_with_saul_alinsky

22. One point of controversy over the CFC program was precisely this question of the ethical and/or rhetorical effect of training the camera on the "disadvantaged" and casting them in the role of victim.

23. *Not In My Backyard.* [return to page 4]

24. In a letter to the Douglas College Dean of Curriculum, Pinney writes:

> "While the centre would be administratively supported on a similar basis to the College institutes it must remain clearly separate from them. Institutes are perceived by the public as primarily academic activities, concerned with observing and gathering information on specific fields. The outreach centre, on the other hand, must be perceived as a catalytic action-oriented facility that is interested in helping people define their own priorities and interests." (Pinney to Day, 18 April 1975, p.2, Douglas College Archives, New Westminster)

25. The daily operations of the Community Communications Center, and the projects accomplished there through the late seventies and early eighties, is documented by a rich archive that includes a daily log, correspondence, reports, scenarios for videos, transcripts of interviews, and dozens of half- and three quarter-inch process videos. These may be found at Kwantlen Polytechnic University Archives, Surrey Campus (formerly Douglas College).

26. That Pinney has now shifted his "social animation" skills to the corporate citizen is evidenced by a recent blog entry:

> "We are in an age where half of the world's top economies and most influential institutions are now businesses. The power and speed of business far exceeds the capacity of governments to keep pace on the regulatory front as the current global financial crisis clearly illustrates. When it comes to solving social challenges, again the capacity of governments to respond is increasingly limited. Governments struggling under mounting deficits are barely able to keep entitlement commitments they have to their constituents, never mind innovating to meet the complex social and environmental challenges of a global economy.

> Indeed, if government intervention alone was sufficient to solve these problems then [...] we could assume they would have 'been solved long ago by governments doing the job they were elected for.' In reality [...] we know the only way to find 'real solutions' to complex social problems of the 21st century is through new forms of collaboration between business, government and civil society." (Pinney, "Critique Shines Light on Challenges of CSR Practice, August 31, 2010, http://blogs.bcccc.net/2010/08/critique-shines-light-on-challenges-of-csr-practice/, accessed 8/15/2011)

27. For an acerbic take on the circulation of the term "Vancouverism," see Ingram, Gordon Brent, "Squatting in 'Vancouverism': Public Art and Architecture after the Winter Olympics," 21 March 2010 entry in his blog Designs for the Terminal City (www.gordonbrentingram.ca/theterminalcity, accessed 15 August 2011).

28. Cameron Owens, "Challenges in Evaluating Livability in Vancouver, Canada," Case study prepared for Planning Sustainable Cities: Global Report on Human Settlements, 2009, p. 3. (http://www.unhabitat.org/grhs/2009, accessed 8/15/2011)

29. Since the seventies, Bridgeview has continued to attract benevolent neighborhood improvement schemes, including a recent initiative sponsored by the United Way: Action for Neighborhood Change, whose efforts were documented in a promotional video made in 2006. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9YozG4fW2aw&feature=youtu.be

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Images fom *Blue Vinyl:*

Blue Vinyl opens with a shot of the Helfand family home before vinyl replaces its wood siding.

Give me shelter: the ecology of the home in *Blue Vinyl* and *Libby, Montana*

by [Robin L. Murray](#) and [Joseph Heumann](#)

Helfand films the removal of rotten wood siding from her family home. The shot establishes her presence as a character in the film.

The *Blue Vinyl* title shows us the completion of the new siding.

Although many documentaries explore the devastating sense of loss residents feel when their homes are lost or destroyed by everyday eco-disasters, few examine the environmental consequences of the building materials used to construct the home. *Blue Vinyl* (2002) and *Libby, Montana* (2004) move beyond lamenting eco-driven loss of the home place found in environmental documentaries from mountaintop removal films such as B. J. Gudmundsson's *Rise Up! West Virginia* (2007) and *Mountain Mourning* (2008)[1] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] to Josh Fox's anti-fracking expose, *Gasland* (2010), and unmask some of the environmental hazards of the home itself. Although their documentary approaches differ, both *Blue Vinyl* and *Libby, Montana* reveal the toxic environmental hazards faced by workers constructing housing materials and the homeowners themselves, with *Blue Vinyl* focusing on the dangers of Polyvinyl Chloride, and *Libby, Montana* highlighting asbestos and its mineral source, vermiculite.

In the personal narrative-driven *Blue Vinyl: The World's First Toxic Comedy* (2002), co-director and writer Judith Helfand and co-director/cinematographer Daniel B. Gold become comic detectives in their attempt to find a viable solution to Helfand's parents' home repair dilemma: Is it possible to replace rotting wood siding with "products that never hurt anyone at any point in their life cycle" but still provide the economy, endurance, and good looks of cheap but toxic blue vinyl? After attempting to convince her parents to forego their new vinyl siding choice for a more environmentally friendly alternative (as long as it's cheap and looks good), Helfand and Gold embark on an investigative journey that reveals both the dangers underpinning vinyl use and the challenge to find a viable, affordable, and environmentally friendly alternative.

In *Libby, Montana*, directors Drury Gunn Carr and Doug Hawes-Davis take a more traditional documentary approach to expose the health hazards asbestos has caused in Libby's mines and factories from 1919 until their closure in 1990. Also structured like a mystery, this social documentary combines talking head and direct cinema approaches to illuminate the biggest case of community-wide exposure to a toxic substance in U.S. history, resulting at last count in an estimated 1,500 cases of lung abnormalities. The film carefully documents the history of a town that moved from logging to mining vermiculite. Ninety-two percent of people who worked for the mine more than twenty years died from lung disease. Most condemning is evidence that W. R. Grace & Company knew the danger of asbestos and did nothing. According to the film, despite overwhelming health problems and clear signs of criminal negligence, the EPA's arrival in 1999 leads only to more wrangling, this time over whether or not Libby should be labeled a Superfund site.

Blue Vinyl provides a narrative of discovery in which Helfand and Gold reveal what the dangers PVC mean for not only her parents and other suburbanites keen on siding their homes with vinyl, but also for PVC chemical plant workers and home dwellers nearby. *Libby, Montana* documents a mystery now solved but unresolved due to bureaucratic battles by EPA officials and corporate leaders over designating the town a Superfund site. In these eco-documentaries, multiple issues of home and homelessness are explored, revealing a plethora of environmental problems that, according to *Blue Vinyl* and *Libby, Montana*, especially, should be addressed no matter how difficult the task. The repercussions of doing nothing are too toxic for both human and nonhuman nature. Overlooking these eco-disasters may turn the everyday into catastrophe, these films assert, reinforcing the power of an environmental justice movement grounded in an equitable and humane vision of home.

Although the documentary strategies applied in *Blue Vinyl* are more compelling than those in *Libby, Montana* these films both effectively illustrate the complexity of environmental justice issues. Environmental injustice, lack of human rights, and, to a certain extent, environmental racism intersect in the literal study of homes in *Blue Vinyl* and *Libby, Montana*. For these films' directors, it's not just how you live and how you build your home, it's where you live and what's around you that contribute to the everyday eco-disasters associated with constructing and sustaining shelter.

Blue Vinyl and environmental justice

A shot of a PVC Complex in Lake Charles, Louisiana contrasts horrifically with the suburban Helfand home on Long Island.

Blue Vinyl highlights environmental justice and racism issues associated with both production of housing materials and the housing industry. Helfand introduces these issues by documenting the environmental effects of home construction after talking with her parents about new siding for their home. Their red wood is rotten and must be replaced. Helfand's mother thinks her daughter overreacts to the family's choice to replace their old wood siding with vinyl. But because Helfand had a rare form of cervical cancer caused by the DES her mother was given during pregnancy, worries about toxic chemicals used in vinyl's PVC production are a priority for her now. Helfand's poignant documentary and video diary, *A Healthy Baby Girl* (1997) illustrates the sense of loss she encountered after the cancer forced her to undergo a radical hysterectomy. In her exploration of the ecology of home building, Helfand wonders, then, is vinyl siding safe? *Blue Vinyl* documents the years of detective work Helfand and her co-director Gold perform to discover and reveal their answers.

The film has been both heralded and slammed, primarily because of its rhetorical strategies. It won numerous awards and received laudable reviews from many reviewers.[2] Other reviewers, however, highlighted weaknesses. For example, *The City Paper* suggests the film's narrative may be "manufactured" or "at least jury-

Despite the obvious dangers of lake pollution, people continue to fish in Lake Charles for sport and food.

Helfand celebrates during Mardis Gras in Lake Charles while displaying the finished product of the Lake Charles PVC plants.

Mossville, Louisiana citizen, Diane Prince, discusses her own dioxin-related cancer with the filmmakers, introducing environmental racism to the film.

rigged." Reviewer Christopher Null describes it as "extremely long," and Bill Durodie of the conservative website "Culture Wars" calls *Blue Vinyl* "a case study in dumbing down." For us, however, even though Helfand and Gold's documentary journey to reveal the dangers of PVC production and use may be diluted by Helfand's choice to personalize the issue in relation to her parents' siding and her own health issues, it effectively illustrates and addresses environmental injustices of home construction.

Blue Vinyl effectively documents the disastrous consequences faced by residents and workers denied environmental justice. According to the EPA,

> "Environmental justice ensures that no population, especially the elderly and children, are forced to shoulder a disproportionate burden of the negative human health and environmental impacts of pollution or other environmental hazard."

Environmental justice breaks down into three distinctive categories: procedural inequity, geographical inequity, and social inequity. These categories serve as the basis for the UN Draft Principles on Human Rights and the Environment, which state:

1. "Human rights, an ecologically sound environment, sustainable development and peace are interdependent and indivisible.
2. All persons have the right to a secure, healthy and ecologically sound environment. The right and other human rights, including civil, cultural, economic, political, and social rights, are universal, interdependent and indivisible.
3. All persons shall be free from any form of discrimination in regard to actions and decisions that affect the environment." (Cifuentes and Frumkin 1-2)

By integrating interview data into a personal journey from a Long Island home to the source of its vinyl siding, Lake Charles, Louisiana, the film successfully illustrates the dangerous ramifications to the health and welfare of residents and workers when denied an ecologically sound and healthy environment and forced to endure environmental discrimination and the environmental racism associated with it.

As in *A Healthy Baby Girl*, filmmakers Helfand and Gold choose to explore and expose an environmental disaster by providing personal connections with its health hazards. In *A Healthy Baby Girl*, Helfand individualizes dangers of DES exposure by exploring her own responses to cervical cancer with a poignant video diary. Maintaining a serious tone aligns well with her sense of mourning after her own DES-related hysterectomy. As Gold explains in an interview with *New England Film.com*,

> "in *A Healthy Baby Girl*, Judith shot nearly the whole thing herself, and it wouldn't have been appropriate for anyone else to shoot it. It was all about the intimacy... a family who has suffered toxic exposure."

In *Blue Vinyl*, Helfand and Gold add a comic tone to a personal narrative approach that captures stories in two settings, Long Island and Lake Charles. More importantly, the film is effectively structured to transform personal narrative into powerful rhetoric. By interspersing talking heads, beautiful minimalist animation by Emily Hubley and Jeremy Dickey, and inter-titles with the stories narrated in its two distinct settings, the film argues vehemently against the production and use of PVC, the source of vinyl siding. Ultimately, the film strategically draws on arguments used to convince Helfand's own parents to discard their vinyl siding for an environmentally sound alternative to prove the environmental dangers of PVC

Filmmakers attempt to tour the Lake Charles, Louisiana, PVC industrial complex.

for us all.

Although the film opens with a title card about the ubiquitous use of vinyl siding, it is the story of Helfand's parents' need to replace their siding that captures attention. Helfand and Gold adeptly connect Helfand's parents' decision to replace their rotten wood siding with vinyl with the everyday ecodisaster associated with its production. When Helfand protests the change of siding, for example, her parents suggest she video the wood to highlight its decay, providing a catalyst for the narrative documentary that follows. Helfand's personal story becomes less intimate too than in *A Healthy Baby Girl*, "free[ing] her up to be more of a character and g[iving] her the opportunity to do something more visually," according to Gold. Helfand's role injects personality into the film. By appearing as both a narrator and a character in the film, Helfand attempts to connect emotionally and intellectually with the audience, so they too become part of her journey.

 Some may see Helfand and Gold's approach as a weakness because it promotes a limited perspective with no attempt for balance and, at times, a seemingly "manufactured" narrative, a weakness that prompted Michael Moore to rename his feature, *Roger and Me* (1989) a movie instead of a documentary (Aufderheide 4). For us, however, their approach strengthens their arguments by making the audience members of the Helfand family. As Aufderheide asserts, "Helfand becomes a representative of the public—people who need inexpensive siding and also suffer the health consequences of using it" (8), but this representation also allows audiences to identify with the film's complex issues and connect with its anti-dioxin rhetoric.
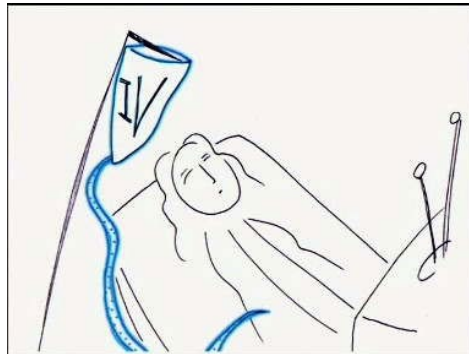
Ironically, cancer-causing PVC is used to produce medical equipment, including IV bags and lines
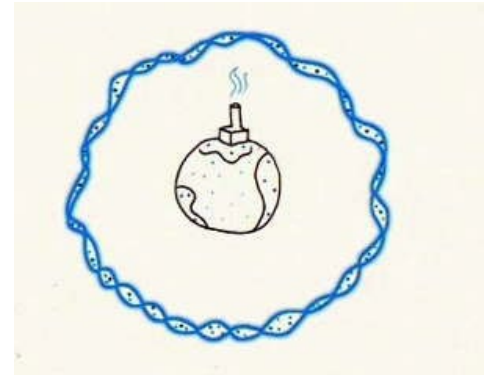
In this animated image from Hubley and Dickey, a PVC plant is represented as a world-wide bomb.

The cataclysmic fire at the MGM Grand Hotel killed and injured more people with smoke from burning PVC products than the flames themselves.

In long shot, a cheery billboard seems to welcome people to Lake Charles industrial complex and wish them luck.

Billy Baggett, attorney for the victims of Lake Charles PVC exposure, prepares to enter the factory with his now patented 360 degree camera platform.

Dan Ross, a victim of PVC exposure as an employee in the Lake Charles facility, struggles for his life.

The first level of environmental injustice occurs at her parents' house when the siding installer removing the rotting wood tells Helfand that vinyl will only emit dioxins and other toxic chemicals if burned in a fire. Later we learn at least one of these fires prompted the vinyl companies to form a vinyl organization "to protect and promote vinyl" or, according to Helfand and Gold, for damage control after fires in the 1970s and 80s culminated in a huge conflagration at the MGM Grand Hotel where smoke and toxic fumes fed by PVC piping, wallpaper, and plastic mirrors contributed to the majority of the 87 fatalities and 700 injuries. Greenpeace calls PVC the poison plastic because it causes permanent respiratory disease when burned, producing dioxins so powerful that people die from inhaling its gases before the flames reach them.

Although the toxicity of the contents of Helfand's parents' vinyl siding is an everyday ecodisaster, the production process for the PVC vinyl contains highlights a second level of environmental injustice and a second set of victims: those who work in and live in proximity to PVC plants. To uncover the truth about vinyl, the now detective Helfand goes to the source of vinyl siding—St. Charles, Louisiana, where PVC, the main ingredient in the vinyl, is produced in enormous chemical plants that dominate Mardis Gras celebrants, recreational lakes, and fields where cattle graze. Near the factory, the owner of a local restaurant, the Pitt Grill, and workers talk about what causes cancer. It's the smoke in the air, they explain, broaching at least one violation of environmental justice and human rights. Their environment is clearly not "secure, healthy, and ecologically sound." But the plant managers argue that hazards near PVC plants may be a relatively good thing because the company takes care of toxic spills fast.

As evidence of the blatant environmental injustices caused by the plant, however, several area residents note the repercussions of living near this toxic plant. In the town of Mossville, for example, African American resident Dianne Prince has cancer and believes she received it from the factory. She asks, is safety a big issue in Lake Charles? At Community Risk Management meetings, other residents discuss the hazards of raw materials from the factories. Residents near the factory are unable to breathe. Trees are brown on the side facing the plant, green on the other. But factory owners only refer Helfand to the Vinyl Institute website where scrolling graphics extoll the uses of vinyl and its "green" recyclable footprint. Vinyl is everywhere, "making a difference every day," according to the website. And at a conference devoted to alternatives to PVC, the Vinyl Institute was there to exalt the benefits of their product. Other evidence Helfand uncovers tells a different story:

> "They say they're not hurting the environment, but 56% of the product is chlorine. Is there any proof that it's safe?"

To substantiate the flagrant environmental injustices occurring for both workers and residents living in vinyl sided homes, most studies indicate that any benefits of PVC are outweighed by their risks. Helfand calls PVC "the Watergate of molecules," since it is more dangerous than any other plastic. A single PVC fire can cause disease and death. But the danger doesn't stop there. Dioxin is produced at both ends of the PVC life cycle, so PVC and its vinyl output is not easily recycled. PVC ends up in landfills causing more disease and death. According to Helfand, the damage caused by PVC is similar to what DES did to her. All evidence demonstrates that dioxin is an unwanted contaminant caused by PVC, a toxic waste that is not degraded by humans or the environment. If dioxin is getting in the atmosphere, it's getting in the food chain and building up in our bodies, Helfand explains, highlighting the breadth of environmental injustices associated

This photographic evidence reveals the industry's attempt to cover up its knowledge of the dangers of PVC exposure.

In this shot, Helfand carries her ever-present example vinyl siding while moving through the canals of Venice, Italy. Here she and Gold document the culpability of the European PVC producers in a worldwide cover-up of the hazards of dioxins in vinyl.

with use of PVC.

The environmental injustice associated with PVC production, use, and disposal extends to human rights issues when Attorney William (Billy) B. Baggett, Jr. reinforces Helfand's claims. As a lawyer, he can legally film areas where exposed workers have been, but he is only allowed one plant visit. When he enters the factory, he uses five cameras on a handheld platform to get a 360-degree view, hoping to show where workers he is representing might have been exposed to polyvinyl chloride. To augment Baggett's evidence, Helfand and her crew provide examples of workers afflicted with cancer and other diseases due to PVC exposure. One afflicted worker's wife holds a hand-written note on a bill that proves the company's culpability: "Exceeds short-term exposure. Do not include on wire to Houston," the note explains, a message whited out on the versions Baggett receives from the company. This blatant omission provides proof and lays the groundwork for conspiracy allegations against all PVC manufacturers, with Baggett, the lawyer, leading the charge.

This omission serves as strong evidence of human rights violation, as criminal activity that puts people who work in or live near the factory or live in vinyl-sided homes at risk. The industry's knowledge of the negative effects of PVC exposure is confirmed in the documents Baggett and his clients find, including internal industry documents from Venice, Italy to all parts of the United States warning about the dangers of PVC toxins. According to *Blue Vinyl*, the European Vinyl industry researched PVC repercussions in 1972 and discovered that low doses of vinyl chloride caused cancer in laboratory mice, even in amounts that were less than the legal levels to which workers were exposed. None of this was revealed to the public, however, because a secrecy agreement was signed in Europe, and American companies agreed to it.

After interviewing Dr. Cesare Maltoni about his 1970s research on dioxin exposure from PVC, Helfand and Gold show some of the laboratory rats that contracted cancers from low-level exposure to dioxin.

Billy Baggett gives the filmmakers a tour of the PVC industrial complex at night, emphasizing his mixed feelings about his reactions to the spectacular view its flames produce.

Ailing or deceased employees in Venice and Lake Charles and residents in Lake Charles and Mossville, Louisiana highlight the human costs of such a violation or rights and environmental justice. To prove that PVC causes cancer and that

residents are breathing PVC too, testing buckets are created to measure toxic exposures and warn residents in Lake Charles. When tested, the air was found to be full of chloride and other chemicals, and those toxins also contaminated nearby water sources.

The most extreme environmental consequence of PVC and dioxin revealed by the film, however, transforms environmental injustice into environmental racism, when residents of Mossville, a predominantly African American community in the region, are forced to leave because PVC toxins from area factories have contaminated their water. As further evidence of blatant environmental injustice and racism, these residents are not only left without a community but also without recourse for future health issues. In order to sell their homes at low prices, the PVC companies required all residents sign an agreement that they would not file suit against the company if they developed health problems caused by the contamination. Clearly, these residents have lost their right to a secure, healthy, and ecologically sound environment.

A for sale sign illustrates the environmental racism caused by dioxins contaminating an entire water source. All citizens were forced to leave their community because of the toxic water produced by PVC leakage.

After signing release forms with the PVC industry, a Mossville home is moved to a new location.

One of the homeowners photographs the house movers taking her house to a new location, documenting for one last time her Mossville property.

The move from Mossville through the St. Charles streets emphasizes the loss these residents sustained because their town was turned into an environmental disaster.

Although choosing a more environmentally sound product will not solve industry-wide problems, to at least minimize one aspect of environmental justice, the negative environmental consequences of home construction, Helfand looks for eco-friendly siding alternatives for her parents' house. Despite setbacks, including struggling with the dilemma of Habitat for Humanity's vinyl homes being funded by the Vinyl Institute and Helfand's ineffective programmed meeting with the Vinyl Institute, Helfand discovers reclaimed wood as an alternative for the vinyl that also proves aesthetically pleasing to her parents. Since it costs a small fortune, however, she misses her goal to find an economically feasible alternative and, ironically pays for the new siding herself with money from a DES settlement, her

Helfand struggles with her drive to expose the hazards of PVC when she sees and films a Habitat for Humanity home built from vinyl and financed by PVC companies.

In this scene, Helfand prepares to interview a PVC industry expert while the PVC industry interviews her. The interview is limited to 30 minutes, and the expert relies on talking points, so little new information is revealed.

The filmmakers connect the dangers of PVC in home construction with the discovery of hazards from asbestos contamination in homes across the U.S., drawing hope from the eventual success of asbestos protestors.

"uterus money," as she calls it.

Blue Vinyl provides a clear case that vinyl siding is hazardous to human and nonhuman nature but ends with an ambiguous view of alternatives too expensive for Helfand's family or Habitat for Humanity homes. Yet it also broaches some wider-reaching solutions to the environmental hazards of PVC, condemning vinyl companies for their knowing endangerment of their employees and of residents near their plants. *Blue Vinyl* addresses environmental justice issues on both an individual and universal level. Helfand's film unearths inequities related to geography and racial and class bias, illustrating the extent to which Lake Charles and Mossville, Louisiana, and Venice, Italy, have become "sacrifice zones" in which toxins are tolerated because residents and factory workers lack power. Helfand and Baggett help provide them with a voice in both Helfand's documentary film and the court cases Baggett leads.

PVC, vinyl, and industrial ecology

The dangers of PVC have been widely documented in research reports, but so have studies that demonstrate the viability of safer and affordable alternatives. According to David T. Allen,

> "billions of pounds of vinyl chloride are produced annually."

Yet, in their Tufts University study, Frank Ackerman and Rachel Massey effectively document the hazards of PVC and vinyl over its life cycle, but they also note the availability of viable and safe alternatives for PVC products, including wood shingles or clapboard, fiber cement, and simulated stucco. They also refute claims that vinyl is "maintenance free," arguing that fiber cement is "more durable than vinyl" and "does not warp or burn." Although Helfand and Gold conclude that environmentally sound alternatives are available but costly, Ackerman and Massey disagree, challenging "economic arguments for continued use of PVC" and asserting that alternatives to PVC are not only viable but also economical. According to their report, "academic studies have shown that the costs of environmental protection are routinely overestimated in advance, and decline rapidly after implementation."

Ackerman and Massey's results are reinforced by the research conclusions of both G.K. Al-Sharrah, et al and David Goldsmith, engineers who highlight the need to insert environmental objectives in industry analyses that "represent sustainability giving good results in selecting environmentally friendly processes and at the same time profitable" outcomes (1). Goldsmith, on the other hand, argues against "an anthropocentric model of nature as a supplier of resources" and instead asserts "that it would be beneficial to critically examine the ethical basis for sustainable built environments. These studies demonstrate the viability of an environmentally sound approach to PVC and other chemical production.

Despite these studies, PVC production and consumption continue at an astronomical pace. In fact, in 2011, nine years after the release of *Blue Vinyl*, Mossville, Louisiana, the predominately African American community right next door to Lake Charles, lost its case with the EPA to establish the community and its PVC plants as a Superfund Site. The EPA Superfund Strategy Recommendation on May 3, 2011 explained away both water and soil contamination as "within the range of the background for the area" or "naturally occurring." With these justifications, the site score fell below the required 28.5. For us, however, this oversight implicates the EPA in the environmental injustice and racism suffered by the residents of Mossville, as well as the residents of Lake Charles and the thousands of PVC plant workers in the region, issues addressed with strong emotional appeal in *Blue Vinyl*.

Helfand helps remove the blue vinyl siding from her parents' home in preparation for new ecologically sound reclaimed wood.

The last piece of the reclaimed wood is placed on the Helfand home with the only remaining emblem of blue vinyl as a penciled scrawl on the top piece.

Helfand and her parents create warnings about PVC hazards from the blue vinyl, hooking it to Mardis Gras beads as a reminder of its Lake Charles, Louisiana origin.

To spread the word about PVC hazards, the family gives away the beads with their message while pointing viewers to their My House is Your House campaign for green home construction.

[Go to page 3](#)

## *Libby, Montana* and the Superfund

The DVD menu highlights the film's ominous tone and its horrific subject: the environmental injustice of asbestos exposure.

Libby, Montana, however, did receive a recommendation from the EPA for a superfund site status, and the narrative surrounding the superfund's implementation is documented well in Drury Gunn Carr and Doug Hawes-Davis's traditionally structured *Libby, Montana* (2004). With a synthetic approach that combines interviews with victims with news reports and archival footage of mining operations providing historical context, the film illustrates the dire living conditions in Libby, where for decades the Zonolite Company mined vermiculite, a mineral used for insulation that also contained tremolite, a deadly type of asbestos. This more traditional approach to documentary also incorporates a balanced perspective of the environmental issue virtually missing from *Blue Vinyl*.
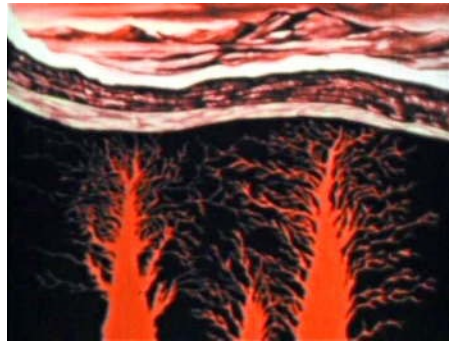

Opening scenes of *Libby, Montana* draw from a science film illustrating the rise of vermiculite, a source of asbestos, as an ancient mineral from the earth's core.

This science film also demonstrates the versatility of asbestos by showing its flexible mineral structure


Many early scenes provide a nostalgic glimpse of the pristine waters and forests around Libby. This scene shows archival footage from what look like the 1930s of a lake surrounded by forested hills.
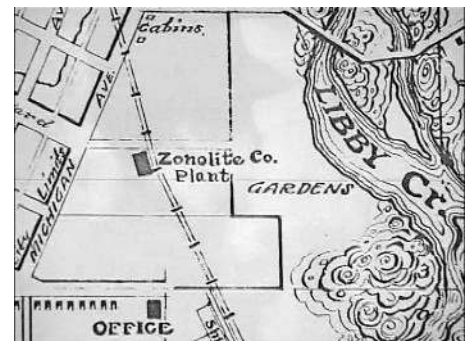
The film includes different parts of a regional map. In this segment, the Zonolite Company's location is pinpointed.

This scene also provides a nostalgic look at Libby's past. The shot is in color, suggesting that it came from a more recent era.
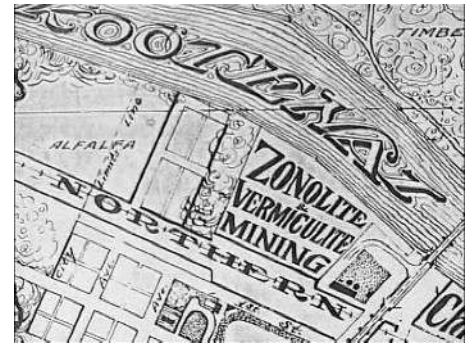
The map of the region gives very specific information about vermiculite mining by the Zonolite Company.

Although the film depicts the region's past from a nostalgic perspective, it gives a nod to other environmental disasters in the area. This scene illustrating lumbering practices foreshadows ...

... the overcutting that occurred over the decades in the lumber industry. Nostalgia seems unwarranted when juxtaposed with images of a past that encouraged exploitIng resources. The number of felled trees in this scene is both awe inspiring and horrific.

Unlike *Blue Vinyl*, *Libby Montana* looks more like what Patricia Aufderheide calls a "regular documentary," featuring

> "sonorous, 'voice-of God' narration, an analytical argument rather than a story with characters, head shots of experts leavened with a few people-on the-street interviews, stock images that illustrate the narrator's point ...,perhaps a little educational animation, and dignified music" (10).

This "regular" synthetic approach weakens the film's rhetoric, so the documentary remains compelling only because the human impact of eco-disaster in the Libby community infuses an emotional appeal to the audience and filmmakers.

The film provides few scenes of the actual asbestos factory. This archival footage from the 1950s gives us a glimpse of its size.

The documentary's approach muffles their argument in multiple ways. Instead of structuring the film as an anti-corporate argument, for example, Carr and Hawes-Davis organize it like a mystery, with facts revealed slowly to build toward a conclusion. Although Helfand and Gold choose a similar structure, because they also include a clear position and a personal narrative with which audiences can connect, their film maintains its strong rhetoric consistently. Because of its mystery structure, *Libby, Montana,* on the other hand, can, as Mike Hale of the *New York Times* explains,

> "be hard to follow and frustratingly incomplete if you don't already know the framework of the long-running and complex story."

The film's attempt to take a balanced approach to the issues of asbestos poisoning and cleanup also dilutes the film's rhetoric. By including conflicting perspectives like those of townspeople suspicious of the EPA, as well as bureaucrats concerned about the economic downsides of a Superfund designation, the filmmakers' own sympathies with those affected by asbestos become less clear.

The historical strategy Carr and Hawes-Davis implement with their subject may also limit the power of the film's rhetoric because it lacks the personal appeal of *Blue Vinyl*

Massive amounts of dust rise out of the Zonolite vermiculite mine in Libby, Montana.

and shifts its strategy from argument to exposition, slowing down its momentum and, perhaps, causing audiences to lose interest in the mystery being revealed (perhaps too sluggishly). For us, however, the historical approach doesn't go far enough to reveal the history of resource exploitation in place in the West since at least the General Mining Act of 1872 which declared that

> "all valuable mineral deposits in lands belonging to the United States, both surveyed and unsurveyed, are hereby declared to be free and open to exploration and purchase."

Instead, the film takes an historical approach in its narrative that begins with the transition from logging to mining in the mid-20th Century, drawing on an environmental nostalgia for a once pristine region and highlighting the town's surrounding forests, lakes, and mountains.
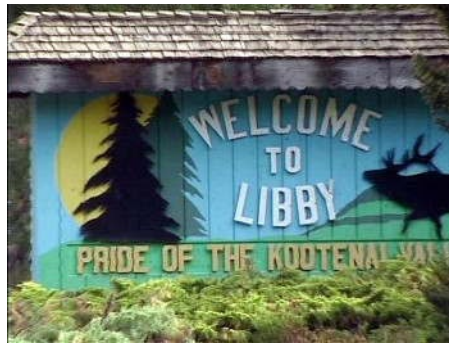
Libby, Montana's welcoming sign illustrates the town's ties to a frontier past of forests and wildlife, an ironic touch in what has become a cancer alley.

Although many reviewers criticize the multiple scenes highlighting the road-side evangelist, in this shot he condemns the asbestos producers in ways that move the narrative of the film forward.


A taxidermy shop serves as another sign of the mythical wild past Libby continues to embrace.

Nostalgia lingers for a more pristine era before Zonolite as with this annual Logging Days celebration. This sign welcomes area visitors to the festival.

To emphasize the irony behind the celebration, Libby locals watch a parade during Logging Days in front of a store selling lumber. These locals struggle with an EPA that in their eyes challenges the rugged individualism on which the town and region were built.
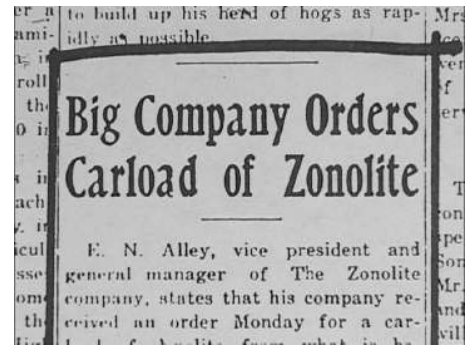
The film takes the time to illustrate the benefits Zonolite brought to the community as one of the biggest producers of asbestos and its offshoot products, including insulation and fertilizer.

Shots demonstrate how this simpler lifestyle translated to an idyllic town life in the 1950s. According to the EPA, however,

> "While in operation, the Libby mine may have produced 80 percent of the world's supply of vermiculite. Vermiculite has been used in building insulation and as a soil conditioner. Unfortunately, the vermiculite from the Libby mine was contaminated with a toxic form of naturally-occurring asbestos called tremolite-actinolite asbestiform mineral fibers" ("Libby Site Background").

This is one of the few shots of the mine provided in Libby, Montana.

Despite this nostalgia for the pristine Libby before vermiculite, the film also suggests that the area's resources have been depleted for years, explaining that after fur traders left the area, logging companies came in and overcut and harvested the mountain forests, depleting resources in the Montana region. According to the film, there were up to 2000 people working in the Forest Service and 200 in the mine during this seemingly untouched period, and Libby was seen as a flourishing community. Yet today, Libby is still represented as a good place to hunt and fish. Visitors can tour the Mineral Avenue attractions and social clubs on the down town main streets. The police are efficient and protect tourists suggesting that the town has remained untouched by the modern world, and loggers' days and taxidermist exhibits commemorate the logging and fur trading industries of more than half a century ago.

To further confuse the message of the film, interviews reveal the pain behind the beauty. One worker in the Zonolite mine, for example, suffered health problems because the Zonolite Company and, after 1963, W.R. Grace, Incorporated, developed vermiculite into products that were found near his farm. To introduce the source of the vermiculite, the film provides shots of the mine from above. The film explains that vermiculite was procured through strip-mining that began as early as 1919 and used for insulation and fertilizer, products managed and distributed by the Scotts Lawn Care Company. What the film reveals, however, is that workers in the mine were dying of cancer at astronomical rates, a horrific truth local W. R. Grace manager Earl D. Lovick knew but dismissed for profit.

Here one of the victims of vermiculite poisoning, Les Skramstad, a long-time Zonolite employee, explains his own health concerns. Les was reluctant to talk with the filmmakers because his neighbors had labeled him a radical for suggesting W.R. Grace and Zonolite had contributed to his disease.

Les and his family share happier days in a family photo taken while Les worked for Zonolite.
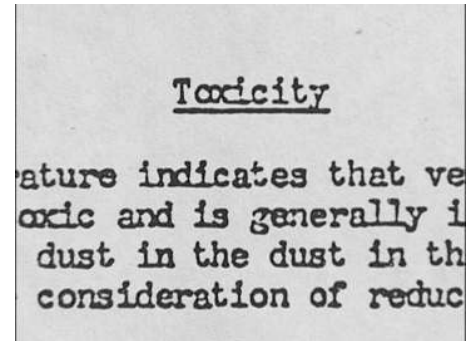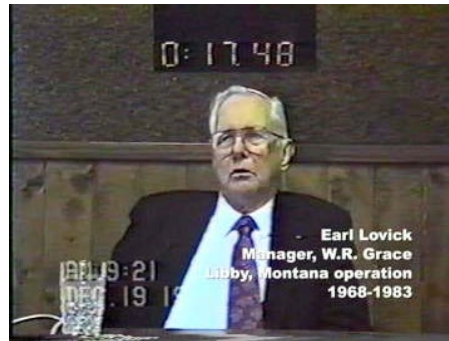
Libby, Montana includes multiple shots of the trial determining Zonolite's culpability in the massive cancer deaths in the region. From 1963 forward, the company was owned by W.R. Grace, and local manager, Earl Lovick, served as the star witness in the case. Lovick died of asbestos-related cancer in 1999.

Like Blue Vinyl, Libby, Montana shows actual documented evidence of corporate knowledge of the dangers of asbestos exposure. This piece highlights the toxicity of vermiculite. Within two years of acquiring the mine, Grace's internal memos show the company discussing the mine dust's extreme toxicity — information never given to employees.
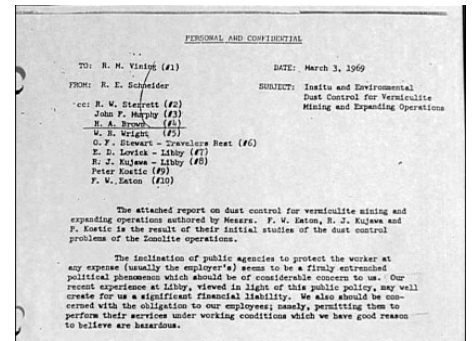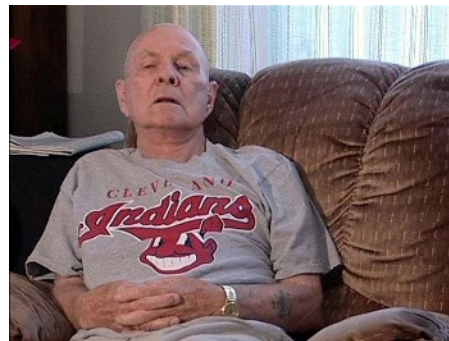
Another victim, Bob Wilkins, recounts his own experiences as a Zonolite employee. Because the dust from the mine clogged their breathing apparatus, many employees removed them in order to continue working and keep their jobs. No one at Zonolite informed them of the dangers of vermiculite exposure and inhalation.

This letter displayed in Libby, Montana, serves as clear evidence that W.R. Grace and Zonolite were culpable in the rash of asbestos-related cancers spreading through Libby and the surrounding area.

On top of this flagrant act of subterfuge, the mine waste was also uncontrolled because of downsizing of the EPA and its affiliates during the Reagan administration (1981-1988), and W. R. Grace, Incorporated embezzled $4 billion and declared bankruptcy, so the US government would have to pay for the cleanup.[3] [open endnotes in new window]
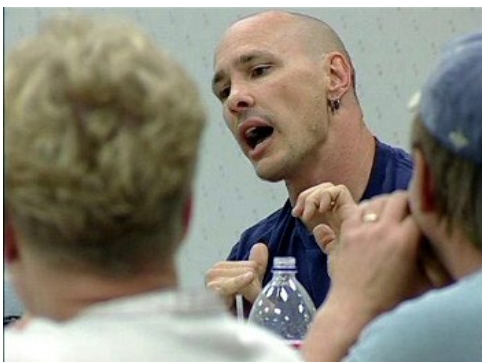
Because of this complex context, the film asserts that Libby needs a Superfund designation from the EPA in order to finance the cleanup, a claim then EPA chief Christy Whitman supports in spite of Montana's governor (Judy Murtz) ability to veto the National Priorities List (NPL) Superfund funds. In 2002, a guarantee for clean up but not for health or insulation removal was approved. The Public Health Emergency was excluded because of federal funding cuts. The rest of the film documents the reasons for the Superfund designation and its results. The filmmakers first emphasize and describe workers whose health was destroyed because of vermiculite: Bob Wilkins, who worked from 1969-1990, a worker now in North Dakota with almost no lungs left and another miner who gets x-rays every year with no report, for example. These workers and others

Montana State Senator
Bill Crismore (R-Libby)

contract asbestosis and other forms of cancer.

The film also demonstrates that there is proof that the company knew of these consequences since 1948. Corporate heads knew by 1956 that there was asbestos in the dust, but the workers did not know that tremolite, in the dust, was asbestos. The company had even documented the percent of workers dying on a graph that only corporate heads would see. According to this graph, ninety two percent of employees die by the time they have worked for the company for twenty years. And the cancers were not confined to miners and workers in the plant. Workers' whole families contracted cancer. As of May 2002, according to the film, the EPA study reveals 246 asbestos deaths and 1200 diagnoses of asbestos poisoning. Because of these deaths and illnesses, the EPA designates the town as a Superfund site and attempts to clean up the tremolite asbestos in the mine, plants, and surrounding homes with help from its emergency coordinator Paul Peronard. In Libby, as in any town where asbestos insulates a home or fertilizes a garden, a home becomes a hazard rather than a shelter.

Ultimately, *Libby, Montana* does document the connection between vermiculite-asbestos and Libby's health concerns while also revealing the corporate cover-up and the heroic attempts by EPA on-sight emergency coordinator Peronard to implement cleanup efforts for the town. Yet the balanced approach taken by the filmmakers draws our sympathy away from the poisoned townspeople to Peronard's own struggles to appease conflicted townspeople and encourages audiences to empathize with Governor Judith Martz's reservations to support the extensive cleanup. By beginning the film's historical background in the twentieth century instead of the 19th, the film also misses the chance to interrogate policies that allowed such mining to occur.

The good news is that Libby, Montana's situation was dire enough to satisfy the EPA's risk assessment study. The EPA began collecting samples in December 1999, collecting nearly 700 "from air, soil, dust and insulation at homes and businesses." They released the first indoor air sample results in January 2000 to both property owners and the media and general public and located "areas in and near Libby that were likely to have high levels of contamination such as two former vermiculite processing facilities." To determine the extent of the contamination, the EPA "also looked at general asbestos exposures in the community and at health effects seen in people who had little or no association with the vermiculite mine in Libby," working

> "closely with local, state and federal agencies to understand how people might come into contact with asbestos-contaminated vermiculite and what can be done to prevent future exposures" ("Libby Site Background").

After three years of research, Libby was added to the EPA's National Priorities List in October 2002, providing Libby with a Superfund Designation and the assurance of extensive cleanup. In September 2011, too, a Montana judge approved a $43 million settlement for the "more than one thousand asbestos victims in the town of Libby, Montana" (*Mesothelioma News*). The cleanup continues as of October 2011, with the addition of contaminated woodchips to exacerbate Libby's problems (*New York Daily News*), problems that affect us all, according to Patricia A. Sullivan. Her study of Libby vermiculite workers revealed

> "significant excess mortality from nonmalignant respiratory disease...even among workers with cumulative exposure" (584).

Her study's conclusions, however, demonstrated how far-reaching Libby's asbestos problem might be:

> "Since vermiculite from the Libby mine was used to make loose-fill attic insulation that remains in millions of homes, these findings highlight the need for better understanding and control of exposures that currently occur when homeowners and construction renovation workers (including plumbers, cable installers, electricians, telephone repair personnel, and insulators) disturb loose-fill attic insulation made with asbestos-contaminated vermiculite from Libby, Montana." (584)

Since approximately 80 percent of all vermiculite was produced in Libby, Montana until its mine and factories closed in 1990, the possibility that insulation is made with

asbestos-contaminated vermiculite from Libby is high and reinforces the need to consider the production content of a home as well as its location.

According to the film, 218 crosses were displayed in memory of the known Libby asbestos victims.

Libby, Montana also shows some of the consequences that arose after the film's context. By July 2004, for example, more than 1200 other Libby residents had been diagnosed with lung abnormalities.

Libby, Montana personalizes this environmental tragedy by focusing on the lives of Les and Bob, two victims who died from asbestos-related disease.

Conclusion: from *Blue Vinyl* to environmental justice at home?

Films like *Blue Vinyl* and *Libby, Montana* demonstrate the drive for a better home, a shelter and a place where environmental justice is the norm, and environmental racism is minimized. This would be a place where

> "no population, especially the elderly and children, are forced to shoulder a disproportionate burden of the negative human health and environmental impacts of pollution or other environmental hazard."

What is missing from these films, however, is a larger story connected to the underfunding of the whole Superfund site cleanup program. On a human level, both Mossville and Libby are tragedies, maybe even crimes, but given the numerous Superfund site contenders, and the underfunding of the whole program, perhaps under triage, sites such as the Hanford, Washington Nuclear Reservation or the Picher, Oklahoma lead mining eco-disaster documented in PBS's *The Creek Runs Red* (2007) may in fact be more dangerous and warrant a higher priority.

Ultimately, however, *Blue Vinyl* and *Libby, Montana* underpin well the search for a better home, one we all can take, but one that also makes transparent the injustices hidden that may lie behind vinyl production and home construction. By choosing to maintain a clear rhetorical position that is infused with an engaging personal narrative, *Blue Vinyl* more effectively advances efforts for an environmentally sound home than does *Libby, Montana*, yet the goal for both films' journeys is a better home for us all, one based on the idea that "human rights, an ecologically sound environment, sustainability development and peace are interdependent and indivisible," one that is "secure, healthy, and ecologically sound," and one that is

> "free from any form of discrimination in regard to actions and decisions that affect the environment" (Cifuentes and Frumkin 1-2).

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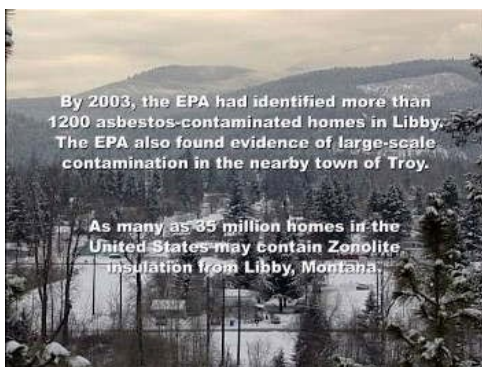
Notes

1. Other anti-Mountaintop removal films include the following:

- *The Appalachians*. Dir. Phylis Geller. Evening Star Productions, 2005,
- *Black Diamonds: Mountaintop Removal & the Fight for Coalfield Justice*. Dir. Catherine Pancake. Bullfrog Films, 2006,
- *Burning the Future: Coal in America*. Dir. Michael Novack. Firefly Pix, 2008.
- *Coal Country*. Dir. Phylis Geller. Alliance for Appalachia, 2009,
- *Keeper of the Mountains*. Dir. B. J. Gudmundsson. Patchwork Films, 2006,
- *The Last Mountain*. Dir. Bill Haney. Massachusetts Documentary Productions, 2011,
- *Look What They've Done*. Dir. B. J. Gudmundsson. Patchwork Films, 2006,
- *Mountain Top Removal*. Dir. Michael Cusack O'Connell. The Group Entertainment, 2007,
- *On Coal River*. Soma Productions, 2010.Dir. Francine Cavanaugh and Adams Wood.
- *Razing Appalachia*. Dir. Sasha Waters. 2002. [return to page 1]

2. It earned The Best Environmental Feature Film award for the Activist Film Festival in Los Angeles, The Documentary Award For Excellence in Cinematography at the 2002 Sundance Film Festival, and First Prize for Best Documentary at the 2002 Bermuda International Film Festival. It was also nominated for two Emmy Awards: Best Documentary and Best Research. The film also received laudable reviews from *The Philadelphia City Paper* and Festival Reviewer Tim Stopper.

3. In May 2012, however, a federal jury in Montana acquitted W.R. Grace and Company and three of its former executives of knowingly exposing mine workers and residents of Libby, Montana, to asbestos poisoning and then covering up their actions. [return to page 3]

Filmography

Blue Vinyl: The World's First Toxic Comedy. Dir. Daniel B. Gold and Judith Helfand. Stars. William Baggett. Docurama Films, 2002. DVD.

The Creek Runs Red. Dir. Bradley Beesley, Julianna Brannum. PBS Independent Lens, 2007. TV.

Libby, Montana. Dir. Drury Gunn Carr and Doug Hawes-Davis. High Plains Films, 2004. DVD.

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The two daughters discuss memories of growing up and their relationship with their mother in *Daughter Rite*.

Home movie footage of a daughter and her mother in *Daughter Rite*.

Identity, interactivity and performativity in Michelle Citron's *Queer Feast*

by [Kathleen Scott]

Michelle Citron has been an academic, filmmaker and new media artist for almost 40 years. Her films and new media projects such as *Jewish Looks* (2002), *Visual AIDS* (1997), *What You Take for Granted* (1983) and *Daughter Rite* (1978) address a wide range of topics related to the politics of sexuality and identity. These and other films have been screened at numerous film festivals and museums, including the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney in New York City, the American Film Institute and The Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., as well as the Berlin, London and Edinburgh film festivals (Citron, "Biography").

In this article I will be focusing mainly on *Queer Feast*, a quartet of Internet-distributed new-media works made at different points throughout Citron's career that have been collected together at [queerfeast.com]. The interactive narratives of the *Queer Feast* quartet have been screened separately at art galleries, conferences, contemporary art museums, film festivals and media exhibitions around the world.

Queer Feast confronts issues surrounding the expression of queer desire and love; the difficulties and joys of monogamous lesbian relationships; the invisibility of queer communities within the larger society; and the role of performance in queer relationships. The narratives share a high level of interactivity that allows viewers to construct their own stories out of the various segments provided. Alongside my own analyses of the thematic and aesthetic tropes of Citron's narratives, I include information and quotes from an interview I conducted with the filmmaker in January 2012.

First I will explore how the aesthetic and narrative content of *Queer Feast* relates to that of *Daughter Rite* (1978), one of Citron's earliest films. I will then provide a short introduction to each of the works in *Queer Feast*, and discuss issues of identity, interactivity and performativity in these works at length.

Daughter Rite and *Queer Feast*: tracing a genealogy of political filmmaking

Citron's first film to garner widespread acclaim and scholarly attention was *Daughter Rite*, an experimental narrative detailing the complexities of mother-daughter relationships. The film blends home movie footage with fictionalized documentary interviews in exploring the complex relationship of two adult sisters to their mother.

Daughter Rite provided the opportunity for female viewers to share in a

progressive feminist politics that was taking place both behind and in front of the camera. The film was heralded as a non-essentializing exploration of motherhood and the loving and fraught bonds between mothers and daughters, as well as a politically generative critique of the patriarchal power underlying the personal dynamics of heterosexual families. Linda Williams and B. Ruby Rich argue that *Daughter Rite* differs from classical Hollywood films that explore mother-daughter relations, such as *Stella Dallas* (King Vidor, 1937) and *Mildred Pierce* (Michael Curtiz, 1945), in that it provides an explicitly feminist account of motherhood. The film attends to the ability of maternal figures to both reproduce patriarchal power and impart a feminist consciousness to their daughters, instead of "merely exalt[ing] its ideal while punishing and humiliating the individual women" who take part in these relationships (Williams and Rich 17).

In this regard *Daughter Rite* presents a timely feminist film praxis that

> "moves beyond the previously acknowledged boundaries of the positive 'image' of strong female role models and the avant-garde film's negative lament of women's inscription within patriarchal language" (Williams and Rich 22).
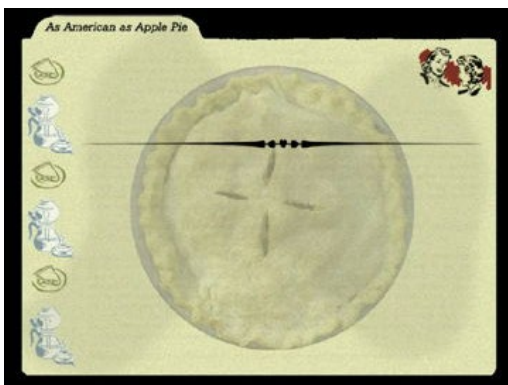
Daughter Rite employs many of the formal techniques on display in *Queer Feast*, such as the use of home movies, cinema verité-style footage, voice-over narration and image/voice-over disjunction to examine how visual representations of the past aid in constructing our identities—a process shared by filmmaker and spectators. These works share a blend of documentary and fictionalized elements that Citron employs to deconstruct the "truth-telling" capacities of documentary film, as well as to explore how we as viewers construct our identities from documentary and home movie footage. I will address the obscured lines between documentary and fiction in *Queer Feast* in my discussion of identity formation in these works.

Daughter Rite also prefigures the high level of spectator interactivity encouraged by the aesthetics of *Queer Feast*. In both works, the ambiguity of the images and narration allows
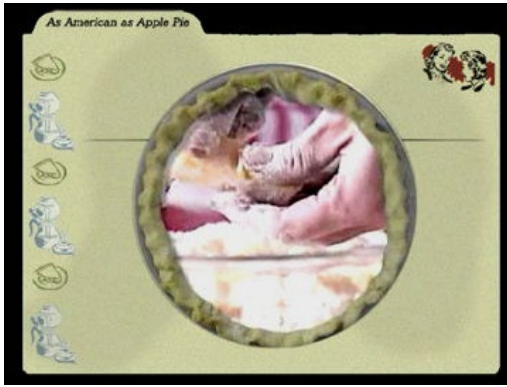
> "each viewer...to discover for herself a wealth of connections within the film without ever having to say, *this* is what the film means or *this* is the author speaking" (Feuer).

Daughter Rite and *Queer Feast* are also linked by their engagement with contemporary political movements. Feminist film scholar Jane Feuer argues that *Daughter Rite*'s deconstructionist use of cinema verité footage reflected the realist aesthetic of feminist experimental films and documentaries that emerged in the 1970s. *Queer Feast*'s explorations of queer identities and relationships in the post-Stonewall era constitute its timely political project. The problems resulting from the invisibility of queer identities and desires constitutes a major thematic and aesthetic strand uniting the narratives of *Queer Feast*. These works seek to expose this invisibility by providing space for their previously silenced queer subjects to tell their stories. These subjects engage in a queer politics through their testimonies, which make visible their exclusion from larger cultural and social narratives surrounding relationships, desire, love and identity. In this regard, perhaps as important as the specific content of the narratives in Citron's films is the fact that they are being told at all: the speech-acts of the films are fundamentally political by virtue of the challenges they present to queer invisibility.

The menu of *As American As Apple Pie*.

Similar to the highly individualized reactions elicited by the intimate narratives presented in *Queer Feast*, *Daughter Rite* has resonated personally with many viewers. Feuer describes her reaction to the film as a conflation of her personal and professional lives, in which she writes about *Daughter Rite* "with the voice of a film critic, but [she] watched it as a daughter" (Feuer). In my discussion of the

Hands cut butter as one partner accuses the other of cheating.

works in *Queer Feast* that follows, I will attempt to highlight the ways in which these works elicit personal reactions in viewers that dovetail with the politicized content and form of the works themselves.

In addition to individual engagement with the narratives, the online format of *Queer Feast* raises questions as to the exercise of political choice when we decide what to watch, and how to watch it. These shared formal and thematic tropes allow us to trace a political continuity in Citron's work. Both early (*Daughter Rite*) and more recent (*Queer Feast*) examples engage spectators in the process of interpreting the images and constructing feminist and queer political agendas from these interpretations.

Queer Feast

As American as Apple Pie, made in 1999, is the oldest work in the quartet. It begins with a pie graphic overlaid with keywords such as "butter, cut," "texture," "roll," "crimp," and "peeled" that correspond to the different segments of the film. Each segment features film of a pie being prepared and baked, including extreme close-ups of a pair of hands crumbling dough to make the crust and spooning in apples smothered in butter and spices. A voice-over consisting of conversations between two lesbian partners accompanies these images. The couple's dialogues chart the course of their relationship through various stages, both high and low: birthdays, professional success, family medical emergencies, the difficulties of raising a teenage son, jealousy and hints of infidelity.

An unidentified woman slowly eats the olive out of a martini.

The interactive menu of *Cocktails & Appetizers*.

Unidentified female smoker, lit and costumed for maximum glamour.

Cocktails & Appetizers (2001) consists of separate segments that we access by choosing small drinks icons from an illustrated menu. Options such as "Daiquiri," "Mint Julep," and "Tom Collins" lead us to pieces that detail the breakup of lesbian couple Jean and Max, and Max's subsequent relationship with the seductive Jesse. As in *As American as Apple Pie*, the images in *Cocktails & Appetizers*, mostly close-ups of women against black backgrounds, do not correspond directly to the voice-overs.

A butch prepares her look by slicking her hair back.

Jean, Max, Jesse and various friends and acquaintances provide the voice-overs that convey to us the intimate details of the three women's romantic entanglements. Each of the segments is quite short, around 30 seconds or less, and feature films of various women performing seductive acts: smoking, eating olives out of a martini, brushing back their hair to put on an earring or slicking it back to achieve a butch look, and adjusting masculine clothing such as a man's dress shirt and a large belt buckle.

In the longer final section of the narrative, we witness Max and Jesse's first tryst immediately after the former was still in a relationship with Jean. Max and Jesse first meet when Max photographs Jesse for an exhibit. A light flirtation develops between the two as Jesse poses in different butch/femme outfits, erotically slipping on a silk stocking or lowering her shirt as Max directs. Jesse finally takes Max's camera from her, and, after directing Max to lie on the bed, kneels over and kisses her before the scene cuts to black.

The salad options on offer in the menu of *Mixed Greens*.

Mixed Greens (2004) is the longest and most interactively intricate of the four narratives. It begins with a menu of forty-eight vegetables (cucumbers, lettuce, onions, peppers, spinach, and tomatoes). Each choice contains a segment on the topics "Desire," "Family," "Heartbreak," "Mysteries," "Place," and "Other." Viewers compile their own film of eight segments, which they place in a video player at the bottom of the screen. A film composed of these segments then plays, and it can be altered depending on the segments viewers choose to include.

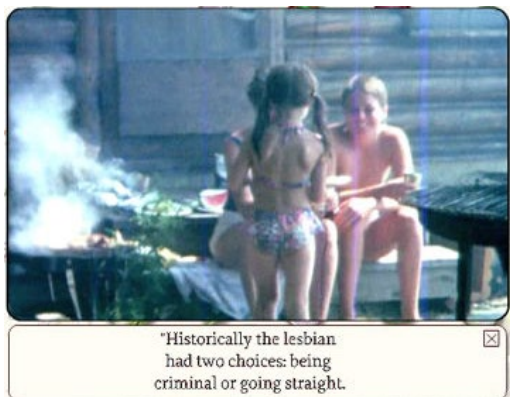Dublin at the beginning of the 20th century, at the time Oscar immigrated.

A butch woman at a BBQ in the 1970s.

Menu with segments chosen by the viewer in video player at bottom.

A moving subject within a Polaroid, with handwriting overlaid.

Text accompanies many of the images in *Mixed Greens*.

Citron describes *Mixed Greens* as a "do-it-yourself movie about identity, belonging, and the things we desire" (Citron, "Curriculum Vitae"). The segments in *Mixed Greens* tell a wide variety of stories related to these themes, ranging from Citron's great-grandfather's experience in the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in the early 1920s, to the "witch hunts" for homosexuals in the 1950s and 1960s McCarthy-era United States, and the personal romantic histories of Citron and many other queer women and couples inspired by Citron's interviews with real-life subjects.

Citron's interviews with real-life subjects inspired the multiple narratives centered around queer relationships in *Mixed Greens*. The stories of these relationships usually address, as Citron notes, issues related to identity and belonging. These issues include family dynamics within queer households, lack of family acceptance for queer women, the depression that can result when we are compelled to hide our sexuality in order to conform with what is "normal" and expected, learning to "own" your sexuality, and the bonds of solidarity and support that can form within queer communities. The film also details some of the less politically salient aspects of these relationships, such as the difficulties of maintaining monogamy within committed partnerships and marriage, adultery, bisexuality, and relationships with straight women.

Stylistically, *Mixed Greens* incorporates many of the same formal traits as *As American as Apple Pie* and *Cocktails & Appetizers*. The film often employs aural/visual mismatches in which viewers are left to establish connections between the images and voice-overs, as well as moving photographs and Polaroids that develop as the subjects inside tell their stories. Many of the photographs and videos are also accompanied by texts underneath that comment upon the topics under discussion at the time.

Leftovers (2011), the most recent of the four narratives, shares the story of elderly working-class lesbian couple Norma and Virginia, who have lived in the Northside of Chicago their entire lives. We never actually see the couple; we only hear Citron narrating the story of their friendship with a younger gay neighbor named Kevin. We also hear an unidentified female voice reading short fragments of poetry throughout, later revealed to have been written by Norma. Kevin strikes up a friendship with Norma when he sees that she has a limp and begins driving

Virginia and a friend in earlier years.

her to the grocery store every week. He is struck by her insistence on maintaining complete privacy regarding her personal life; Norma never admits to a sexual relationship with Virginia, her housebound lover.

As I will discuss, the aesthetics of the film reflect its concern with articulating the isolation and invisibility of the reclusive couple. *Leftovers* affectively conveys the distance Norma and Virginia keep from the outside world, whose non-acceptance of their relationship renders them invisible. This invisibility is emphasized when Norma dies, and Kevin is the only person intimate enough with her to know that Virginia is her partner. When Virginia eventually dies as well, Kevin is the sole witness to their relationship.

As in the previous three works in *Queer Feast*, narration accompanies images that do not directly depict their subjects. Photographs of Norma and Virginia when they were younger serve as visual witnesses to their relationship, testifying to its existence and allowing their memories to survive. An interesting inclusion is the paint-by-number drawings that gradually fill in as the story progresses, mimicking Kevin and Citron's slow uncovering of Norma and Virginia's hidden history together.

Norma's photographs painted to life.

Go to page 2

The invisible speaks: queer lives in *Leftovers*

The thousands of objects amassed by Norma and Virginia...

... pile up onscreen.

> "One configuration remains in latency, in abeyance: that of love among women. A configuration that constitutes a substrate that is sometimes mute, sometimes a disturbing force in our culture. A very live substrate whose outlines, shapes, are yet blurred, chaotic, or confused."
>
> (Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* 102-3)

Although feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray wrote the above words in 1984, in many respects queer subjects continue to disturb our cultural norms prescribing appropriate and inappropriate identity configurations and sexual behavior. The films of *Queer Feast* meditate on the invisibility of queers in the wider heteronormative society, providing numerous examples of their exclusion from dominant social discourses on love, sexuality and the expression of desire.

The story of Norma and Virginia in *Leftovers* provides the most striking example of this invisibility. This lesbian couple is indeed invisible to the world, save for their friendship with Kevin, a gay male friend who is out of the closet. Kevin muses that perhaps their reticence to admit to their relationship stems from their being born and coming of age in the pre-Stonewall era, a time when being gay was not as accepted as it is today. Kevin tries to get Norma to talk about her sexuality, but she won't discuss it other than to say that "I think it's right that people have their rights" to express it any way they like.

Leftovers provides explicit evidence of the invisibility and silence surrounding Norma and Virginia's queer identities when Kevin cleans their house after Norma dies and mounting health problems force Virginia to move into a nursing home. Having never actually set foot in their house before, Kevin learns that the women were pack rats who collected, saved, and hoarded almost everything they could get their hands on. Over the years, they slowly built up a barrier of "stuff" to prevent the outside world from encroaching on their private territory.

Kevin uncovers various hidden objects, such as photographs of Norma and Virginia together as young women in the early days of their relationship, buried under mountains of baseballs cards and towering stacks of old *National Geographic* magazines. These unearthed objects furnish proof of their relationship, while the fact that they have literally been "buried" reflects the reclusive relationship dynamics between the two women: Virginia remained secluded in the house for years, while Norma "brought the outside world home" for her. In fourteen years they never interacted with their neighbors or went out together. Their life together was one in which, as Citron's narration notes, "Day in and day out they hunkered down and became a world of two…finding a space of privacy in the silence." Their relationship remained just as invisible to the outside world as the old photographs gathering dust in their home.

Norma and Virginia's reclusive habits should not suggest that the two lived lives completely devoid of social contacts. Citron notes that what she found most fascinating about delving into the artifacts of their relationship was the evidence of a "vibrant community" of queer women from the over two thousand photographs of the couple and their friends taken by Norma from the 1930s to

The images in *Leftovers* afford us only brief glimpses of Norma and Virginia's life together.

the 1950s (Citron interview). Even in the pre-Stonewall era, the photos depict Norma and Virginia displaying affection in public spaces. Citron speculates that these public displays of affection were more acceptable in an earlier, more socially conservative time period precisely because people could not imagine or think desire between women as a possibility; people assumed they were just witnessing sisterly embraces and nonsexual displays of affection (Citron interview).

Brief moments evoke a whole life.

In addition to eliciting questions as to how Norma and Virginia were able to display their desire for on another in public, the affection evident in the photographs also points towards another issue related to the invisibility of queer identities: the disappearance of the couple's queer community and social network. The central question that *Leftovers* poses to viewers is, as Citron phrases it, "How did they get from a vibrant community to being totally isolated?" (Citron interview) Truthful to Citron's belief that interactive narratives should create a space for the emergence of independent thought in viewers rather than furnishing them with transparent and easily consumable storylines (Citron interview), *Leftovers* provides no answers to this question. Instead, viewers are left to fill in the gaps of their incomplete knowledge of Norma and Virginia's life together and can only speculate as to what could have led to their increasing isolation.

Norma and Virginia smile for the camera...

In addition to the vibrant social network of their youth evidenced in the photographs, the narrative crux of *Leftovers* hinges on the fact that Kevin becomes the support network that the two women lack in their old age. He becomes a surrogate son who fulfills the roles of caretaker and friend as the women grow older and their health declines. Norma even gives Kevin an allowance like a child, putting five dollars into a vacation fund for every errand he runs for her. And when Norma eventually dies in the hospital, Kevin is the only one left to break the news to Virginia, as he is the only person aware of her relationship with Norma.

In the absence of a normative family structure, in which the biological children of a heterosexual couple care for their parents in their final years, *Leftovers* illustrates the fact that alternatives do exist for those couples that do not fit this norm. When Norma dies, and the nurse assumes that Kevin is her son, he tells the nurse, "She wasn't really my mother," although for all intents and purposes she was. Kevin becomes the family that the women lack, highlighting the

... and then avoid its gaze in a moment of intimacy.

important role communal bonds play in supporting those from whom heteronormativity demands silence and invisibility.

Despite the fact that Norma, Virginia, and Kevin form a queer family unit (or queer the notion of the "family unit"), *Leftovers* also makes the harsh realities of their invisibility clear with Norma's death. After Norma succumbs to an illness brought on by years of alcoholism, Virginia informs Kevin that she does not want to claim Norma's body; Norma is gone, and Virginia just wants her remains to be taken away. Kevin does as Virginia asks, and Citron's voice-over informs us that Norma's body lay in Cook County Morgue for months before the state government finally paid around $250.00 for a pine box coffin and a funeral. They then placed Norma in a mass grave with 31 other unclaimed bodies, most of them homeless people. Citron notes with irony in her narration that the authorities spent months trying to locate a next-of-kin, but they never came close to discovering Virginia.

In contrast to the public's non-recognition of their relationship, *Leftovers* reinstates Norma and Virginia in one another's lives by bearing witness to a private relationship that the authorities never even considered possible. Citron's work thus becomes political in testifying to their queer relationship when it would have otherwise disappeared with their deaths, their forty-five years together unacknowledged and uncelebrated. The narrative serves as an act of remembrance that allows Norma and Virginia's history to survive. As Citron sums it up at the end of the film, "Virginia, in death, finally came out."

Invisibility and visual evidence

> "I think photographs can be very powerful...how you look makes a statement that can't be ignored."
> —*Mixed Greens*

Citron conveys this historical silencing of the queer couple affectively, through the aesthetic forms in which she expresses the narrative. Her use of photographs, paint-by-number illustrated photographs and a voice-over narration all serve to inform us of Norma and Virginia's life together without completely exposing this very private couple to our gaze. A few examples indicate the plethora of creative techniques on offer: illustrated magnifying lenses hover over old black and white photographs of Norma and Virginia as Citron narrates their relationship with Kevin. Moving photographs depict the women in earlier years. Strips of still photographs taken by Norma unravel across the screen.

Leftovers itself functions as a magnifying glass over the lives of Norma and Virginia, serving as a visual witness of their history when their voices have been silenced. Citron also respects the couple's need for privacy through using these indirect means of depiction to tell their story. Norma and Virginia are simultaneously hidden and unhidden in the photographs; we are only given the images, with no first-hand accounts of their context, meaning or significance. A sense of mystery inheres in the story we are told of their relationship. They tell Kevin nothing about their life together, and we too are left to wonder about their history after having been granted access to only very small pieces of it.

Uncovering a story for which we have only small pieces of evidence.

Citron's use of Norma's photograph archive recalls Citron's investigation of the role that home movies play in identity formation in her book *Home Movies and Other Necessary Fictions* (1999). In relating the story of the impact of her family's home movies on her own identity, Citron argues that we construct the autobiographies of our lives through home images such as those presented in *Leftovers*. Photographs serve both a historical and psychic function in these instances, documenting our history while also allowing us to psychologically construct a narrative of our lives.

The photographs in *Leftovers* serve as the limited foundations for the imagination of biography. They provide visual evidence of Norma and Virginia's life together, but taken out of context and without the details provided through Citron's narration, they actually tell us very little concrete information about their subjects. Kevin, Citron and viewers engage in mutual acts of narrative production by teasing out a hidden history behind Norma and Virginia's latter-day hermetic existence.

Paint-by-numbers fill in the gaps as the narrative progresses.

Paintbrush filling in the photograph.

The paint-by-numbers also serve as apt metaphors for the film's gradual uncovering of the women's relationship. Paintbrushes slowly fill in various illustrated photographs of Norma and Virginia as we learn more and more about their clandestine relationship. As with the use of the magnifying glass over the photographs, the paintbrushes visually enact what Citron attempts to accomplish her film: engaging viewers in the process of creating narrative by filling in the missing pieces of Norma and Virginia's life together. To look closer and discover what the outside world had ignored and would have forgotten, and preserve a queer history for posterity.

Citron's use of photographs as visual witnesses to unrecognized queer histories recalls director Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman* (1996), which also depicted the discovery of queer sexuality through visual material after the subject had died. Dunye's film follows the efforts of a video store clerk (played by Dunye herself) to ascertain the history of an African-American Hollywood actress credited only as "The Watermelon Woman" in her films. This Watermelon Woman, despite her obvious talent, was relegated to "mammy" roles during the 1930s and 1940s. Dunye sets out to discover the identity of this actress by poring over archives of old, forgotten films collecting dust and interviewing the Watermelon Woman's now elderly colleagues and friends.

Through painstaking effort, Dunye is eventually able to reconstruct the Watermelon Woman's history and discover her name and identity. Dunye also finds out that the Watermelon Woman was a lesbian who lived happily with her partner for decades. In this regard *Leftovers* bears a striking resemblance to Dunye's film, as both emphasize the importance of visual memory and oral testimony in preserving the identities of those whose queerness was forced underground by dominant social norms demanding either heterosexuality or invisibility.

Dunye ironically dresses up in "mammy" attire in *The Watermelon Woman* poster.

The Watermelon Woman frequently performed these stereotypical mammy roles in Hollywood films – there were hardly any other options for black actresses.

Invisibility and the queer community

> Jan: "I'm not sure I belong here."
> Peg: "You don't belong out there, either."
> —*Mixed Greens*

Out of the four narratives of *Queer Feast*, *Leftovers* deals most explicitly with the topic of invisibility. However, it is by no means the only narrative to do so. Many of the stories in *Mixed Greens* highlight their queer subjects' feelings of invisibility in the wider community. This feeling of non-belonging motivates them to form strong networks among themselves.

One particular story in *Mixed Greens* clearly illustrates the necessity for a queer community. This story is set in the backyard barbeque of a lesbian couple and their friends. We hear Peg, an older butch lesbian, speaking to Jan, a young woman who displays suicidal behavior due to her insecurities about her queer sexuality and her family's disapproval of it. Jan feels disconnected from her previous social network, while also feeling isolated from the queer community. However, Peg's partner Betty informs Jan that she needs to seek out the support of those to whom her desires are not invisible, telling her that although "The world is a helluva place for our kind," she should not despair: "You've got us now, and we take care of each other. No one else will." Although this visibility to each other does not directly address the problem of wider societal non-recognition of queer sexuality, it nevertheless constitutes a step in generating the communal support system that could eventually combat it.

All of the narratives in *Queer Feast* convey the invisibility of their subjects in an affective register, through the video's aesthetic features. As I discussed previously, *Leftovers* creatively renders visual documentation of Norma and Virginia's invisible relationship. *As American as Apple Pie, Cocktails & Appetizers* and *Mixed Greens* all employ the device of aural/visual mismatches to avoid direct visual depictions of their subjects while still allowing their stories to be told through photographic evidence, voice-overs and off-screen action. The lack of clarity provided by the narratives stylistically conveys the historical invisibility of their subjects in a wider society that stigmatizes and rejects their queer sexuality.

Go to page 3

Visibility and the gaze

Staging the encounter in *Cocktails & Appetizers* through ...

... an older visual style of lesbian pulp fiction.
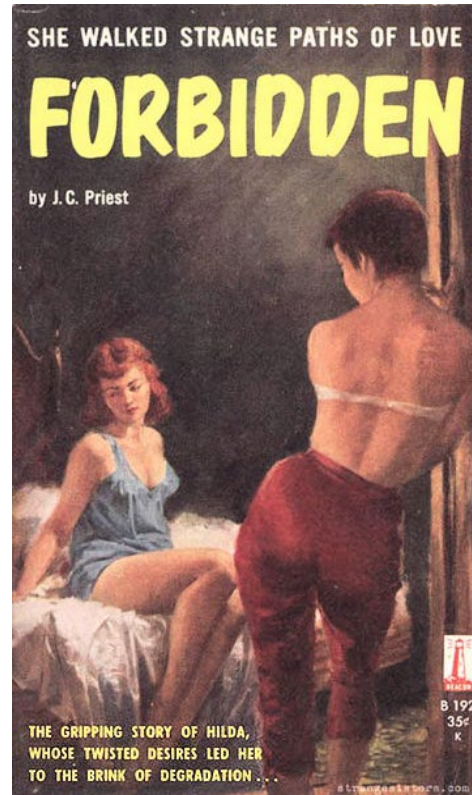
Citron took inspiration from the covers of lesbian pulp novels...
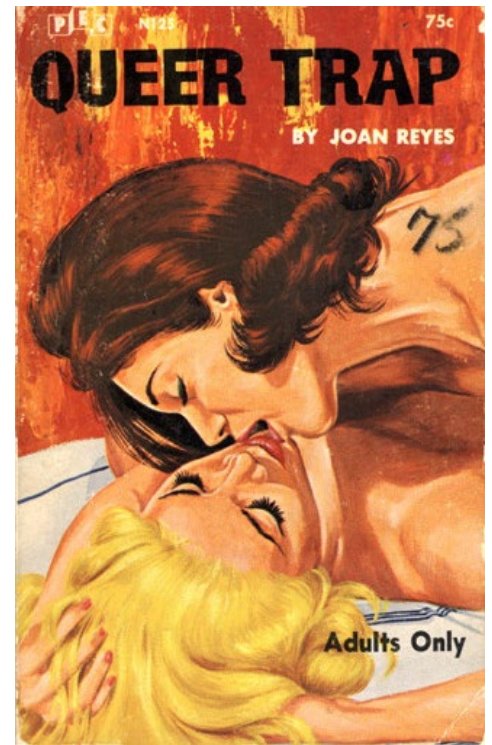
...in designing the staging of *Cocktails & Appetizers*.

Citron's concern with queer invisibility also encompasses an exploration of voyeurism, both as a tool of gendered violence and as a source of pleasure. *Cocktails & Appetizers* and *As American as Apple Pie* in particular seek to rehabilitate the gaze as a means through which queer subjects can become empowered and express desire. The gaze is no longer the exclusive tool of a masculine sadism that objectifies and fetishizes the female body, as described by Laura Mulvey in her seminal essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." The narratives of *Queer Feast* effectively queer the male gaze, appropriating it for gazes of desire between women that do not dehumanize or objectify their recipients.

Cocktails & Appetizers features a narrative in which the right to look and desire queerly plays a central role. The longest segment, which plays automatically after all of the others have been viewed, depicts the beginning of the relationship between Max, a photographer, and Jesse, a younger femme (described by an unseen character as "one hot woman") who poses for her. The camera becomes a tool of mutual seduction that blurs the unequal power dynamics of Mulvey's clearly defined subject/object relations.

Max starts off in the typically "masculine" position with the camera.

Jesse poses for her in various butch and femme costumes.

Jesse appropriates the dominant position by taking up the lens.

And then moves in closer to complete her act of seduction.

The erotic charge of the segment becomes palpable when Jesse, the model, teasingly takes the camera from photographer Max, and, in response to Max's protests, flirtatiously tells her, "I know how to use it." This provocation arouses Max, and she leans in to kiss Jesse. But Jesses backs away and tells Max to lie on the bed on her stomach, before leaning over Max and kissing her.

These actions emphasize the possible expression of queer desire and intimacy through the act of gazing at another. Both Max and Jesse, butch and femme, control the camera and the gaze alternatively. This sharing of the gaze avoids a sadistic subject/fetishized object imbalance of power by which Max, the butch and photographer, would gain complete ascendency over Jesse, the feminine object of the camera lens. This sliding between subject/object positions embodies the argument put forth by queer theorist Teresa de Lauretis in her work on film, in which she describes female spectatorship as a process of alteration between active and passive, masculine and feminine perspectives (1984).

The mise-en-scéne also provides a focus on the act of looking by referencing literature in which voyeurism serves as a source of queer pleasure. In addition to using the device of the camera to signal the two women's mutual control over a queer gaze of desire, Citron composed all of the shots in *Cocktails & Appetizers* as replications of the covers of lesbian pulp fiction novels from the 1950s (Citron interview). Extreme close-ups of femmes undoing their pink sweaters, sipping martinis, undressing slowly under the camera's gaze, as well as the textbook-porn fantasy of Max and Jesse's seduction, speak to the influence of lesbian pulp fiction on the narrative's aesthetics.

Identity issues

"The problem is, you can photograph desire. You can't photograph identity."
—*Cocktails & Appetizers*

In one strand of *Mixed Greens*, Citron's father Sam and ...

... her aunt Thelma recount what they know of Oscar's life in Ireland.

Oscar in his IRA uniform.

In addition to providing visible evidence of queer desire, Citron's interactive narratives also explore identity, the non-photographable part of the subjectivities of her characters. The complexity of these identities cannot be conveyed to viewers through a look or be encompassed by any one action or moment in time. Many key moments in the narratives emphasize the impossibility of fully representing identity onscreen. Rather than depicting the formation and transformation of identities visually, many of the discussions involving this topic occur off-screen, as so are only heard rather than seen.

Perhaps the most striking example of the ambiguous, never fully knowable or visible nature of identity is the history of Citron's great-grandfather Oscar Citron in *Mixed Greens*. Citron includes her father Sam and aunt Thelma in talking head interviews, as well as her cousin Stewart in off-screen interviews, in which she questions them about Oscar's upbringing in Ireland, his involvement in the IRA and his immigration to the United States in the 1920s. Photographs of Oscar and other members of his family are interspersed with films of these interviews to provide us with some visible background of his life.

We discover through Citron's interviews that attempting to discover the specific details of Oscar's life only leads to more unanswerable questions. Although Citron's family knows that Oscar was a member of the IRA, no one can tell her what motivated him to join this illegal organization, which carried the risk of imprisonment or death if he were caught. As Citron herself notes, Oscar's involvement in the IRA is especially surprising given that none of his other family members brothers joined the organization. Oscar's reasons are lost in his history, which the photographs and interviews evoke but cannot fully retrieve.

The stories of Oscar's life also invoke the complexities of integrating the various cultural and religious identities within one particular family. As Sam and Thelma state, Oscar's Jewish family had to assimilate to life in majority Christian Ireland after immigrating from Russia. There were then additional identity complications when Oscar moved his family to the United States in the 1920s and had to attempt to assimilate into the local culture of Boston as Irish-Jewish immigrants. Sam notes that he never experienced any racial or religious tension growing up, that in a certain sense the various familial histories of him and his childhood friends had little effect on their relationships. However, all of these layers of familial and personal histories are inextricably linked to the formation of identity, even those of us who are far removed from the processes of assimilation undergone by our ancestors.[1] [open endnotes in new window]

The links between Citron's family history and the contemporary stories of queer identity suggest the advantages and disadvantages of assimilation in a variety of contexts. *Mixed Greens* contains both narrative strands in order to highlight the complexity of identity formation processes, especially when established social norms designated particular peoples or types of peoples as "outsiders." When these outsiders attempt to assimilate, the narratives make us aware of what we stand to gain and lose by conforming.

Sara and Isabel, the lesbian couple who are looking to adopt a baby in *Mixed Greens,* serve as an illustrative example of the tension queer subjects face between the need to assert their non-normative identity and the desire to assimilate, even to a small degree, into heteronormative society. This story is set in the 90s, when queer couples could not adopt children in the United States. Sarah and Isabel effectively have to relinquish their identities as lesbians in the eyes of the authorities in order to be allowed to adopt: they must provide three references stating that the partner who will officially adopt the child is straight.

The women become angry and disagreeable with each other over the additional challenges they face to starting a family. One argues that they should persevere and "play the game" to get what they want: "It's powerful to claim what the culture says isn't yours." The other says, "I hate this. This whole fucking culture." They have

Oscar and his wife on their wedding day.

In another strand of *Mixed Greens*, Sara and Isabel tell the camera about Sara meeting Isabel's parents for the first time.

Isabel learns to cook Chinese food in case the baby doesn't like American cuisine.

discovered how much society demands the transformation or suppression of their identities in order for them to gain recognition.

However, the videos of the couple also reveal the extent to which they have assimilated into a more mainstream, heteronormative lifestyle. Their decision to start a family serves as the clearest indicator of their assimilation, which ironically is why they confront the host of challenges to their identities in the first place. They are staging their conversations in front of the camera in order to provide a visual diary of their lives for the soon-to-be-adopted Eva. They *want* to be a "normal" couple with children and are devastated by dominant culture's rejection of this desire. They don't want to remain on the outside.

We learn from their conversations with the camera that the rest of their relationship also follows a typical heterosexual couple script: they were college sweethearts, met each other's parents before getting engaged (the butch partner gives the femme a ring), argue about not having enough money to pay the bills, and then duly set about the business of procreating.

This is not to argue that queer couples have an obligation to remain "on the outside," or that their desires for children or a family are always a reflection of their longing to assimilate into a heteronormative system of values. However, considering that Citron created her characters out of composites of interviews with lesbian couples (Citron interview), we can take from the story in *Mixed Greens* that the desire of some queer subjects to assimilate may be partially instilled by social norms that "normalize the queer" by demanding they organize their social relations according to dominant paradigms.

The process of normalization that we see the adopting couple forced to undergo to get their child encourages us to think about what they stand to lose by conforming to dominant paradigms organizing desire and social life. The status of "outsider" and previous determination to resist co-optation is the price they pay to gain the official recognition they need to start a family.

Mixed Greens also strongly conveys the complexity of individual identities that exceed any one designation, including that of "queer." The assemblage of identities within Citron's family serves as a case in point. Her family is a nexus of Irish, Jewish, American, and working class identities. Their cultural heritage cannot be reduced to any one of these identities, nor can we construct a coherent whole out of their different parts.

Citron suggests that our identities are not encompassed by our gender or sexual orientation. We too are internal mixes of different, sometimes contradictory, influences and identities that cannot be easily reconciled with one another. Nor do our identities remain static over time, but they are constantly transforming and adapting to the particular circumstances and contexts in which we find ourselves. *Mixed Greens* presents the personal histories of its various subjects as a mixture of complex and disjointed identities continually in flux. As Citron puts it,

> "Each of us is made up of all these different identities that we are constantly negotiating" (Citron interview).

Interactivity and identity construction

The interactive style of Citron's narratives mimetically enact the processes of identity formation depicted within them. Citron, who holds a doctorate in cognitive psychology, is interested in exploring the construction of personal narratives through memory and engagement with our pasts, the paradigmatic

Sara flashes her new engagement ring.

Isabel loses her temper at Sara's nonchalant attitude towards their money problems.

Extreme close-ups of hands and mouths …

example of this being the construction of autobiographies through home movies and photographs. In her book *Home Movies and Other Necessary Fictions*, Citron describes her own family's home movies functioning as a kind of Lacanian mirror stage in which they were able to glimpse idealized versions of themselves:

> "Watching home movies together…gave my family a sense of history of themselves as a unit and a way to position themselves in the past, where everyone was younger, thinner, healthier, happier, and together. We needed to believe that the visual "evidence" was honest (seeing is believing). We took the surface image as a sign for the whole lived experience" (12).

This self-construction necessarily involves what Citron characterizes as her Brechtian method of making audiences work *with* her films in order to create narratives themselves. In this regard the disjunctive aesthetic elements of Citron's work are central to the processes of identity formation in her subjects and viewers. All of the narratives in *Queer Feast* contain different aesthetic "channels" (Feuer) such as voice-overs, dialogues, images, videos, interviews, and illustrations whose connections to one another are not immediately apparent. This is a narrative strategy that Citron employs throughout her work to explore how viewers react to the lack of easily consumable narratives.

Citron states that she is continually surprised at how strongly people strive to construct a coherent, linear story out of the fragmented narrative lines in her work (Citron interview). She sees her role as an artist as one of creating moments and scenes out of which viewers construct the narratives themselves. For Citron, these acts of constructing narrative from abstract fragments of information are inextricably linked to the formation of identity in viewers:

> "In constructing a narrative, fragments are knit into a whole; what has been shattered is cohered; a sense of self is restored. Narrative construction and integration of the self, regardless of which comes first, go hand in hand" (*Home Movies* 44)

For this reason Citron adamantly refuses to hand straightforward narratives down to her viewers, as she is interested in exploring the processes through which viewers constitute their *selves* through this process. Intelligible narratives are produced through the interactions between the artist and viewers. The construction of stories does not occur solely on one side or another, but in the space between the two; As Citron writes in *Home Movies*, interactive narrative takes place "[w]here the audience and I meet in the emotional space shaped by the film" (70).

Viewers of *Queer Feast* are given opportune chances to engage in mutual acts of narrative constructions with the films through their interactive presentation. By picking and choosing which pieces to watch, and the order in which we watch them, we are given a high degree of freedom to construct our own narratives out of the pieces Citron provides. Just as the content of the narratives often involves the construction of personal identities through memory, so we as viewers mimic these processes by forming our own conclusions about the characters' identities through the scattered pieces of information provided.

Cocktails & Appetizers provides a prime example of the links between identity, memory and interactivity. The first nine segments feature dialogues about a couple with whom we are not previously acquainted, as well as images of women that do not seem to relate directly to these voice-over conversations. Only in the final segment depicting the beginnings of Max and Jesse's relationship are we able to retroactively tie all of the pieces of the story together, necessarily employing memory to reconstruct a linear narrative out of the fragments we are given.

The aesthetic form of *As American as Apple Pie* gives us even less visual information than *Cocktails & Appetizers* on which to base a coherent narrative. In
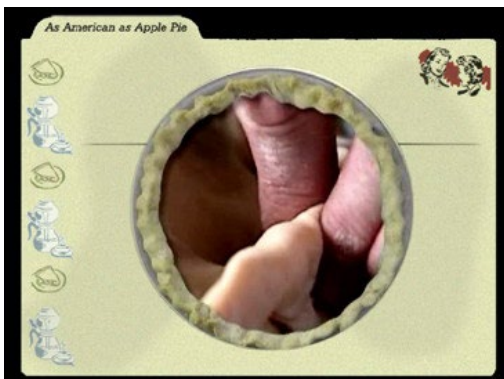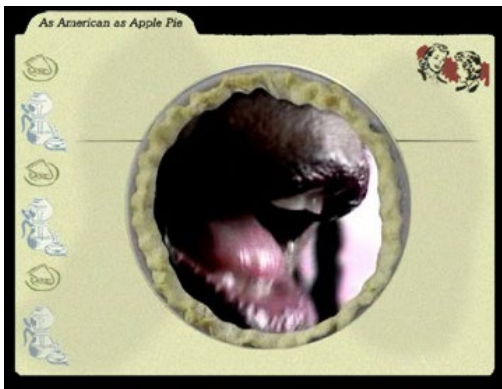
... are the only images we get of the characters in *As American as Apple Pie*.

fact, we only see extreme close-ups of a pair of hands preparing an apple pie while the lesbian couple speaks in dialogues; no photographs, no home videos, no talking head interviews. Despite the fact that we only hear the story without ever actually seeing its characters, we still manage to construct a narrative out of the snippets of conversation that we hear, indicating as Citron would have it our psychological need to construct intelligible narratives out of insufficient information (Citron interview).

Citron also employs her strategy of encouraging viewers to aid in the construction of narrative in *Mixed Greens* and *Leftovers*, although in these works she uses actual home videos and photographs to establish parallels between the identity formation processes of her subjects and those of viewers. In *Mixed Greens*, Citron purposefully centers each of the eight stories around one character experiencing young adulthood, what Citron describes as "the place of identity formation" (Citron interview). These characters use a variety of different visual media, such as Super 8 and 16mm home videos, video cameras, black and white photographs and Polaroids to make sense of their pasts and construct their identities.

Citron employs a wide variety of visual media in *Mixed Greens*. Clockwise, from top left, Super 8 video; 16mm film; Polaroids; and black and white photography.

The narrative pieces provided allow us as viewers to engage in a similar process in constructing the characters' identities, as well as provides a space to think about how our own identities have been shaped by home media. In this regard, the aesthetics of Citron's narratives mimetically enact the identity issues they seek to address, confirming Citron's belief that "new media is a perfect way to continue my exploration of these ideas" regarding the construction of identity through narrative (Citron interview).
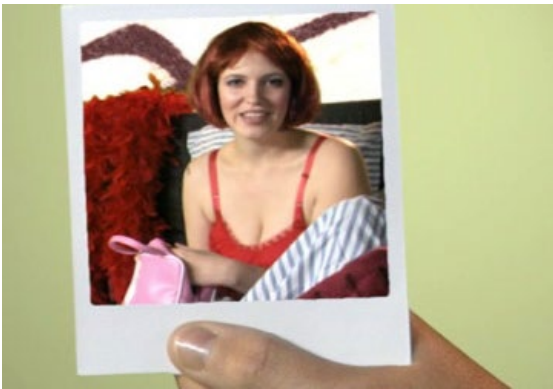
Go to page 4

Exploring the boundary between documentary and fiction

A young butch art student who speaks to her former lovers in Polaroids.

One of these is a high-femme whose love she could not accept.

The mixture of documentary and fictionalized elements in *Queer Feast* demonstrates how we as viewers employ visual representations to both reconfigure our pasts and create new identities. Citron employs a wide array of techniques that blur the boundary between documentary and fiction, including interviews, re-enactments and improvisations based on personal experiences, family photographs and home movies. For example, Citron uses the thousands of photographs taken by Norma to flesh out the story of her and Virgina's hidden history together in *Leftovers*. The work provides a semi-fictionalized account of their lives by re-constructing their relationship out of the documents they left behind.

Documentary also meets fiction in the Sara/Isabel portions of *Mixed Greens*. Citron based these fictional characters on an actual couple whom she interviewed for the film, which adds an element of reality to this fictionalized portrayal. The narrative and formal structure of the film also blend documentary with fiction. The film is shot through the point of view of the camera that Sara and Isabel have set up in order to provide a record of their lives for their soon-to-be-adopted daughter. They speak directly to the camera as in a talking head interview, creating a fiction that is also meant to be taken as a documentary.

Citron writes of home movies in a similar manner in *Home Movies and Other Necessary Fictions*, as narrative fragments that become semi-fictionalized as we use them to construct coherent identities and histories of our selves and our pasts. Citron argues that home-made visual representations constitute both documentations of our pasts as well as foundations for future fictions:

> "In constructing a narrative, fragments are knit into a whole; what has been shattered is cohered; a sense of self is restored. Narrative construction and integration of the self...go hand in hand" (*Home Movies* 44).

The visual documentations of our lives engender what Citron terms "necessary fictions" that serve as key elements in the formation of our identities and the construction of the narratives of our lives. This "necessary fiction" is exactly what is provided by the documentary elements in the narratives of *Queer Feast*.

Performativity and gender

This ambiguous treatment of reality and fiction connects to an issue

Cassandra chides her former lover ...

... for buying into the culture of gender performance.

that is distinct, but nevertheless related to the role of visual representations in forming our identities. With the exception of the segments exploring Citron's family heritage in *Mixed Greens*, the interactive narratives in *Queer Feast* are concerned for the most part with the construction of the queer identities of their lesbian subjects. The performance of gender plays a central role in the formation and transformation of these queer identities.

Citron describes her generation as existing between the strict butch/femme dynamics of lesbian relationships in the pre-Stonewall generation of the 1960s and the neo-conservatism of the 2000s. Her generation, which came of age in the 1970s and is often associated with the countercultural movement, rejected the re-articulation of heterosexual gender roles in butch/femme dynamics. They considered "mimicking hets," as one character in *Mixed Greens* puts it, to be outdated and socially regressive. However, Citron's narratives do not condemn performances of butch/femme roles as heterosexist attempts to normalize the queer. As Citron points out, it is a question of desire more than politics:

> "For some, desire is very much connected to butch/femme dynamics, and for others it is not" (Citron interview).

It is also a matter of historical change. In creating the characters for *Mixed Greens,* Citron interviewed over 20 women of all ages in order to gain insight into generational differences in the construction of queer identities. What she found is that for the 1970s generation, the burning issue was the freedom to express queer sexual orientations rather than challenge gender norms. When queer identities were finally recognized (if not legitimized or accepted) in the 1990s and 2000s, attention shifted to challenging gender roles and the very construct of gender itself (Citron interview).

There is no doubt a liberatory element in being able to express queer desire, whatever form it takes, including that of butch/femme performance. However, we should question the assertion that our desires can ever be totally separated from the dynamics of power and social contexts that influence our modes of being and ways of living in the world; from politics, in other words. The central concern surrounding queer performances of gender in the narratives of *Queer Feast* is whether or not these performances conform to or disrupt the heterosexual norms that they reiterate. That is, do they reify the dominance of heteronormative values by demanding that queer subjects structure their identities and relationship dynamics according to a gender binary? Or, do their performances of heteronormativity effectively "queer the norm" and undermine its authority?

The matter at stake is whether the reenactment of masculine and feminine gender roles augment their strength and ubiquitousness, or if queer performances of these roles reach an extreme point of parody where their powers of normalization are subverted, and the supposed naturalness of masculine/feminine identities and roles is exposed as a heteronormative ideological construction.

Namely, we are looking to establish the *political* significance of gender performance in *Queer Feast*. This question of performance politics can be explored most effectively through reference to Judith Butler's theories of gender performativity. Butler follows a Foucauldian line of thought in defining norms, specifically those governing sexuality and gender, as symbolic and material demands made upon subjects. These norms function on the plane of discourse and through the actions of our bodies as we live them out in our everyday lives. Sexual orientation and gender roles are thus ideological constructs that must be performed constantly, whose historicity is hidden under a façade of naturalness. In Butler's view, the male/female gender binary is a construct that derives its legitimacy from its presumed naturalness— the idea that it pre-exists ideology and politics.

Gender roles are thus always performed, even by those who define themselves as heterosexual. Repetition of performance is a key step in this process. Butler writes that our performances of the masculine/feminine, butch/femme paradigm

> "do not index a sameness, but rather the way in which the social articulation of the term depends upon its repetition, which constitutes one dimension of the performative structure of gender. Terms of gender designation are thus never settled once and for all but are constantly in the process of being remade."
> (*Undoing Gender* 10)

That is, we reconfirm heteronormativity on a daily basis through our performances of its dictates. These performances constitute us as either male or female, masculine or feminine subjects—we structure our lives and identities according to this binary. Butler, again following Foucault, characterizes this conditioning of our subjectivity as a form of biopolitical production:

> "If gender is a norm, it is not the same as a model that individuals seek to approximate. On the contrary, it is a form of social power that produces the intelligible field of subjects, and an apparatus by which the gender binary is instituted. As a norm that appears independent of the practices that it governs, its ideality is the reinstituted effect of those very practices."
> (*Undoing Gender* 48)

Butler argues that these norms mold our subjectivities, as

> "to become subject to a regulation is also to become subjectivized by it, that is, to be brought into being as a subject precisely through being regulated" (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 41).

This binary is not restricted to heterosexual relationships, or the identities of those who define themselves as heterosexual. The narratives of *Queer Feast* offer examples and critiques of the reiteration of the gender binary within queer identities and relationships, illustrating what Butler calls "the transferability of the attribute[s]" (*Undoing Gender* 213) associated with heteronormativity.

Mixed Greens provides various examples of the ways in which gender performances reiterate heterosexual norms, the most striking of which is the young butch lesbian's testimonies of her past relationships. She begins by stating that she is "swearing off straight girls," whom she believes are only attracted to her because they "mimicked hets [heterosexuals]" in their relationships by adopting butch/femme roles. She confesses that she has begun to think that these roles are perhaps necessary in structuring the dynamics of queer relationships, as "There's nothing in society that teaches you to love something like me." She also admits being attracted to "high-femme" lesbians, and considers their exaggerated femininity to be effective queer performances of "owning" their sexuality.

However, in another interview the butch girl also speaks about the problematic aspects of adopting an ultra-butch persona. She complains about butch "dykes" that are "ten times worse than straight men" in competing to display the most masculine behavior. She describes this behavior as "exaggerated male swagger": smoking ostentatiously, moving in packs, and hitting on women with lines such as "if I get you stoned down in the basement, do you wanna fuck?"

In addition to the butch girl's criticisms of hyper-masculine butch performances, her ex-girlfriend Cassandra also denounces strict compliance with butch/femme dynamics from within a Polaroid. Cassandra, who is black, tells her ex and viewers that butch/femme role-playing is essentially "a white girl subculture thing" in which you must "leave your identity at the door" in order to conform to its demands.

These segments of *Mixed Greens* illustrate both the advantageous and disadvantageous aspects of reiterating heteronormative gender dynamics within queer relationships. Whether these dynamics fulfill lesbians' desires or not, we see that the rules governing social relations within queer relationships can be just as confining and exclusive as those governing heterosexual relationships.

The concept of performance also extends to the act of viewing the works in *Queer Feast*. There is a performative element in interacting with the various segments of the works in a way that allows us to interlace their own personal histories with the narratives Citron presents. Spectators are called upon to be active participants in the production of meaning and transmission of affect that are essential elements of the spectatorship experience.

Viewing *Queer Feast* is also a performative act in that it involves a political choice to engage with works of art that reveal and celebrate queer identities and ways of living. Citron's decision to put these films on the Internet for free, where any number of viewers can reach them, is important in this regard. She removes the barriers that prevent the

general public gaining access to experimental art, especially important when much of her subject matter here revolves around the pain and hardship of invisibility and non-acceptance. *Queer Feast* allows for queer spectatorship practices that, regardless of the gender or sexual orientation of the viewer, engage them in a performative politics that celebrates the subversion of existing societal norms.

Performance as politics

So far, I have explored how performance both within and without the narratives of *Queer Feast* relates to queer identity and desire. Another related issue at stake here is the role performance plays (or can play) in a queer politics. Butler writes that performances that queer the norm

> "show us how the norms that govern contemporary notions of reality can be questioned and how new modes of reality can become instituted. These practices of instituting new modes of reality take place in part through the scene of embodiment, where the body is not understood as a static and accomplished fact, but as an aging process, a mode of becoming that, in becoming otherwise, exceeds the norm, reworks the norm, and makes us see how realities to which we through we were confined are not written in stone." (*Undoing Gender* 29)

Butler describes a *politics* of performance enacted through queer bodies that actually challenges (rather than simply reproduces) norms. These performances demonstrate that heteronormativity does not exclusively define the parameters of possible identities, desires, lifestyles and viewing practices– the queer "outside" becomes a liveable option instead of a mere spectre haunting the borders of normalcy.

In this sense, we can view all of the stories of queer identities and desire presented in the interactive narratives of *Queer Feast* as ethico-political demands of the queer "others" of heteronormativity to claim visibility and recognition. Citron's narratives affectively convey personal stories of queer desire and identity while also addressing broader issues such as the invisibility of the queer community and the complex and contradictory politics surrounding queer citations of heteronormative gender roles.

Even when subjects such as Norma and Virginia choose to remain secluded and invisible, *Leftovers* performs a political act in lending representation to their previously hidden identities. *Cocktails & Appetizers*, *Mixed Greens*, and *As American as Apple Pie* also engage in queer politics by exploring the matrices formed by the intersections of desire, the power dynamics of gender performativity, identity formation, and assimilation. The narratives' ethical call to make the queer community visible is augmented by the increased level of responsibility and control given to viewers by the interactive structures of the narratives, which allows us, like the characters, to become performers who express queer stories and identities of our own.

Notes

Queer Feast can be found online at www.queerfeast.com.

I would like to thank Michelle Citron for her assistance in preparing this article.

[1] Citron has addressed the complexities of her Jewish identity in other http://sfonline.barnard.edu/cf/citron.htm. [return to essay]

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Video games, cognitive capital, the cognitariat, the and dream factory's seedy streets: patrolling the citizenry of *LA Noire*

by [Dennis Broe](#) and [Ken Cohen](#) in conversation

Part one: *LA Noire* photo essay: "The fallen idol"
a case from the traffic desk

The story begins with the case title screen, with lurid, *LA Confidential*-style font. The title, too, is lurid, evoking 1940s screen idols as well as idol-worship in a religious sense. Images in photoessay by Yasui Cohen.

The desk's lead officer explains the current case, and that the crime scene is directly across the street from the police station. It involves a crashed car and no deaths, which assigns it to Traffic.

Officers in the desk room make some jokes, yet Phelps is very serious about the case. The case assignment goes to him and his partner, Stefan Bekowsky. Bekowsky is sympathetic to Phelps' seriousness but has internalized the difficulty in cleaning up Los Angeles.

Phelps exits the station and gets a look at the crime scene from the station. It's one of many visual evocations of 1940s LA, long on detail but short on the depth that detail should provide.

Moments later, Phelps has run up the steps adjoining the hill and now has a birds-eye view of the crime scene. This typical cinematic shot indicates Phelps has some superiority over the proceedings below.

In a standard police film shot of several officers hovering over a crime scene, Bekowsky joins Phelps as a superior force, also a God-like protector of the city.
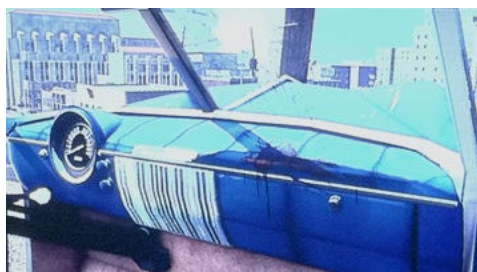
Phelps examines the inside of the vehicle
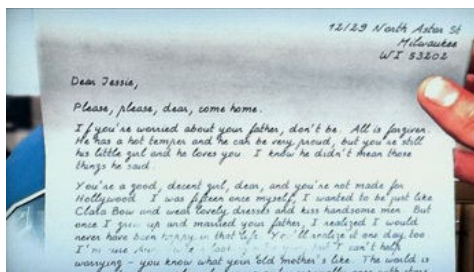
… and a letter written to a woman who is not

The medical examiner says the woman that

and finds blood …

on the scene.

the letter is addressed to is in the local hospital, recovering from her wounds. Meanwhile, there's a witness Phelps should question.

Phelps refers to his casebook for information on the investigation – clues, people and locations – and uses all the information at his disposal during interrogations. Evidence in *LA Noire* tends to be factual, indicating what something is. When Phelps uses it, a more subjective meaning gets attached to that information.

Evidence is also used to force a suspect to explain the subjective meaning of that information. For example, June Ballard was in the car with the young woman. Phelps interrogates her (truth, doubt or lie using the game controller and reading her expressions). He believes she is hiding some information from him.

Phelps and Bekowsky visit the victim, Jessica Hamilton, in the nearby hospital. She's suffered injuries from the car wreck. Using the information he collected at the crime scene and the brief interrogation of Mrs. Ballard, Phelps interrogates Jessica – who proves to be very tough under questioning.

He gets little information from Jessica and decides that it may be better to tail Mrs. Ballard to see if she slips up. Phelps demonstrates a lack of empathy throughout the game, interrogating suspects as if violence was the only way to get to the bottom of the crime.

Having tailed Mrs. Ballard to Mallory's Café, Phelps hides outside until he can slip in and eavesdrop on the phone call. Phelps' behavior shows the panopticon within the city, that Mrs. Ballard cannot find privacy as the police are intruding on her wherever she goes.

Phelps hears Mrs. Ballard talk about Mark Bishop, a movie producer, and decides to go see if he is at home.

In Bishop's residence, there are a number of clues, some without value like this red herring. Clues throughout *LA Noire* can be important or not. Here a comic book seems to be the game creators' way of joking with the audience.

After speaking to Bishop's wife, useful clues are uncovered: checks, movie item nostalgia and an award from a local prop house.

The prop house is the next location in the investigation. As it's a movie-related case, the idea of falseness in film (or games) is compounded by the game's using a prop house for the location where the final evidence is discovered.

Inside the prop house, there are props for all kinds of movies, particularly Asian-set films. At this point in *LA Noire*, there have been no Asian characters. (According to the manual, only two of 400 characters are Asian in a game set in 1947 Los Angeles.)

During a brief interrogation with the prop house owner, Marlon Hopgood, Phelps spots a suspicious mirror …

… which leads to a secret camera room. Clearly the prop house is a makeshift pornography studio. The hidden camera also implicity comments on how an unsuspecting public can be watched.

Photo essay continued
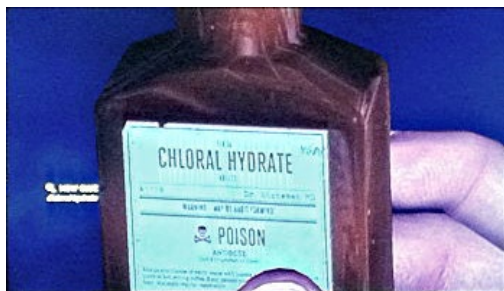
Phelps discovers chloral hydrate, a knockout drug used to bring young girls into the prop house "studio." Jessica Hamilton was one of their victims – and June Ballard was complicit.

Finally, Phelps locates a film canister with the location of producer Bishop's most recent production, *Jungle Drums*, likely a low-budget exploitation film.
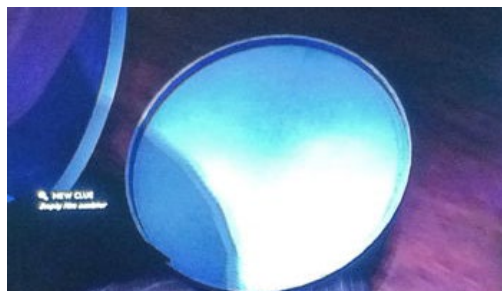
However, the film evidence that should be in the canister is gone. With the other evidence they've collected, Phelps and Bekowsky decide to go to the *Jungle Drums* location on the canister to confront Bishop and to try to get the film.

In the prop house parking lot, Phelps and Bekowsky meet two other cops, cops from a competing desk who warn them not to get into their business. Phelps says that he'll go wherever the evidence leads.
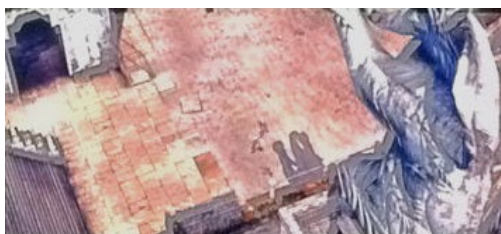
The two cops arrive at the *Intolerance* set, where Bishop is filming *Jungle Drums*. *Intolerance*'s (dir. D.W. Griffith, 1916) set survived in Los Angeles until 1919 as an eyesore that the local residents wanted removed. The Vista Theater now sits on its location at Sunset and Hollywood Boulevard.

Phelps spots Bishop and speaks to him but Bishop runs and Phelps gives chase, climbing ladders to reach the top of the set, overlooking Los Angeles.

Bishop reaches the end of his run and tells Phelps he'll come with him – but gangsters are coming after him and he needs Phelps' protection to escape.

The gangsters arrive and immediately a firefight breaks out. Phelps provides cover fire as Bishop runs ahead of him.

Phelps clears the way below, too. It's a multilevel battle, platform to platform.

Bishop and Phelps reach the ground, and

The final obstacle is the gangsters blocking

Just too late, the cavalry arrives, in the form

with Bekoswky's help, and still must blast their way out of the set.

As a result of Phelps closing so many Traffic cases in such a short time, the higher-ups have decided to promote him to Homicide. He'll be Roy Earle's partner. In a level-based game, advancement Is necessary, and in a story-based game ...

the police cars. Phelps dispatches them and they are safe.

... the story must continue – that of Phelps, the police department and Dr. Harlan Fontaine (see article). A job well done, the officers separate. Another standard cop-film trope of the disparate officers going their own ways after coming together to bring the antagonist to heel.

of Phelps' supervisor and a number of uniformed cops.

Later, Earle and his cronies take Phelps out for a nightcap. They go to an African American jazz club.

Inside the jazz club, the African American host is verbally and physically abused by Earle for doing his job. Phelps leaps to the man's defense, which elicits a similar "know-your-place" attitude from Earle.

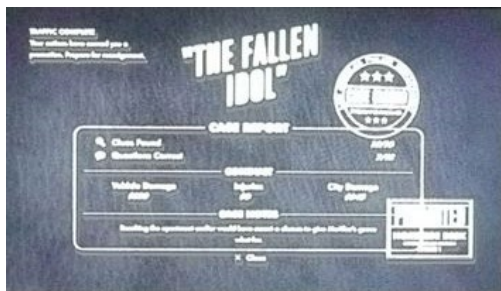The end of the case (and in this instance, the level) brings scores and official recognition of promotion. In this sense, *LA Noire* is like every other role-playing game even as it is more cinematic.

Go to page 3: essay

Broadway at night in LA in the 1940s. The game describes this public, commercial view of the streets rather than depicting LA's disappearing neighborhoods.

Driving downtonwn in *LA Noire*. Driving is a critical component of the game, and there is period detail, which does not get deeper than street signs in most cases. Landmarks exist but must be found and unlocked.

Video games' cognitive capital, cognitariat, and dream factory's seedy streets:
patrolling the citizenry of *LA Noire*

by Dennis Broe and Ken Cohen
in conversation

- Dennis Broe's current book, *Globalizing America's Dark Art: Class, Crime and International Film Noir*, is forthcoming from Palgrave-Macmillan. His previous book was *Film Noir, American Workers and Postwar Hollywood.*
- Kenrick Cohen earned a Masters of Arts in Media Arts in 2011 (LIU Brooklyn) and is currently an MFA student. A gamer since the Atari 2600, he's played the different styles of games but prefers *Madden*, the *Uncharted* series and *LA Noire* to RPGs and MMORPGs. He's a television producer and writer when not gaming.
- *LA Noire* (Rockstar, 2011) is a videogame that garnered attention not only because of its specific setting in late 1940s Los Angeles but because of its use of technology – detailed motion capture of more than 400 actors for use throughout the game. *LA Noire* follows the story of a WWII veteran who returns to LA and becomes a city police officer, moving up the ranks as he closes cases involving arson, serial killers and corruption.

D: The first area that I wanted to talk about, in fact something that I thought made *LA Noire* interesting as a game, is the driving that you have to do in the course of solving a case. As we discovered, it's difficult. But also there is the "free drive" mode, where you can drive through the streets of LA without being on a case, and there is a good deal of care taken to accurately reproduce the topography of Central Los Angeles circa 1947.

K: And that's pre-freeway L.A., which is important because you *have to* drive on the city streets – you can't just take a shortcut using a freeway.

D: Right. That also means you're driving through neighborhoods, which is before this major thing [the freeway system] which essentially destroyed many of the neighborhoods in L.A. and shifted them. (And led the U.S. into its current carbon emissions problem.) The *detail* of storefronts and street signs is fascinating, but I want to make a couple

Cry Danger's view of Trailer Park LA, a little known part of the working class geography of the city.

Kiss Me Deadly's seedy flophouses, also offering a view of the city and, in one sequence, of the disappearing working class neighborhood of Bunker Hill, largely unexplored in the game.

Illustration of Bentham's Panopticon which Foucault suggested was the metaphor for the way in which instrumental reason penetrated bourgeois life and which in the game is applied

of points about that. One is that we don't get a sense of the "neighborhood." What we get is superficial details – advertisements, the kind of place markers that place us in '47 L.A. but without giving us the idea of "neighborhoods." These neighborhoods you're driving through were a part of the landscape of the L.A. noir films of the '40s and '50s where what you were seeing were the flophouses, the trailer parks, the actual neighborhood. They figured prominently in, for example, a long walking sequence through a besieged section of Bunker Hill in *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955, Robert Aldrich) and in the extended description of the trailer park lifestyle featured in *Cry Danger* (1951, Robert Parrish). In the game, you don't see it so much. You see the advertising signs and a lot of accurate detail of storefronts, but not a lot of recalling what made neighborhoods and collective.

K: The detail that they [the game designers] provided was surface detail rather than the gritty detail that you would really want to see and think, "Okay, well, I know Echo Park was like *this* in the 40s" – but we don't even go to Echo Park (a heavily Latino section of the city) in the game.

D: Neither do you see what ethnic group(s) lived in these neighborhoods and what patterns were a part of their life. What I want to suggest is that what the game player is doing is surveilling the streets when you drive. For me – in my book, *Film Noir, American Workers and Postwar Hollywood*, and in my other writing – I've distinguished U.S. film noir as having a first period of 1945-50 and the second period of 1950-55, with the first period featuring [predominantly] the outside-the-law character and the second being the police procedural. What the game highlights is totally the police procedural, and that necessitates a certain kind of mindset. Part of this mindset is that you're patrolling the neighborhood rather than being a part of it, whereas film noirs, such as *Cry Danger* (1951) and *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955) tended to be, at least partially, from the point-of-view of the outside-the-law protagonist. The game is about domestic surveillance, or that is one thing it's about. However, a lot of the historical places we went to, the *Intolerance* set for example, were very interesting.

K: But I think that's window dressing. I agree with you about the surveillance because it seems to me like the panopticon or an open version of it, where people are moving around in a fishbowl and you have plainclothes detectives driving unmarked cars in the surveillance. But at the same time, this is the advent of the walkie-talkies and two-way radios on a mass scale, so you have the guards able to communicate between the cars, and the surveillance is ratcheted up even more. There are many, many eyes watching, leading into the present era of surveillance with closed-circuit television on city streets and the NYPD about to adopt spy cameras mounted in their sunglasses. The setting is also like the panopticon in that Los Angeles

outside the prison walls in the way the LA Police Department continually survey working class neighborhoods, a perspective the gamer is asked to adopt.

Police to the rescue in *Armored Car Robbery*. The APB (All Points Bulletin), staple of the 1950s police procedural, was another aspect of Bentham's Panopticon.

Friday (Jack Webb) investigating a crime in the original *Dragnet*. The series proposed that Los Angeles was made up of two types of people, "perps" and suspects, thus criminalizing what might still be an unruly population. The only other possibility was to be a "witness" which meant turning in your fellows in Webb's McCarthyite fantasy, supposedly based on "just the facts."

is a place people come to but often don't leave, so they are in a sense trapped inside what appears to be a very open fishbowl.

D: I'll throw one thing on top of that. One of the main features in a film like *Armored Car Robbery* (1950), where the police procedural element dominates, a feature that really marked these films, was the call going out over the radio and from the police station, the APB (All Points Bulletin).

K: The game reflects what television became a little later in Jack Webb and radio and later television show *Dragnet* (1951-59), the dictionary-definition of "police procedural," strong-arm tactics by the police and a focus on interrogation. *Dragnet* was television as surveillance. This is a game as surveillance. You're always being looked at by someone and it just keeps going and going.

D: Essentially, neighborhoods are being patrolled *for control.* In the film noirs, you did get to see neighborhoods that subsequently disappeared. You go to LA now and if you look at the Bunker Hill section, it's completely corporatized. The Bonaventure Hotel, which Fredric Jameson wrote about, is there. The only places where you can see these neighborhoods is in film noirs from the 40s. You see something of it here, but not quite what we *want* to see. Or it doesn't break the pattern of the game as a military instructional video.

K: The "free drive" mode enhances the game experience with a number of individual side missions. For example, you might have a robbery in a jewelry store unrelated to the main narrative that you have to go "take care of." The call goes out on the radio and you have the option of pressing a button on your controller to go to that place – and then you have to shoot the "bad guys." There are many of these side missions all over the "open world" of LA in the game.

D: Right, and we should say too that there is a lot of shooting. We were watching a YouTube video from the end of the game.The player who made the video had killed a hundred people as an LA cop in the game.

K: That was a trophy, which is a common reward in contemporary games for your accomplishments. The game, then, considered killing a hundred people an accomplishment. In a war game, you get a hundred headshots (killings) and you get a trophy for that.

D: A second feature of this game, which seems to be a major difference from other games, is that a key portion of this game has to do with character recognition – interrogation of characters – and searching for clues that you acquire to help you solve the case. Then you have to evaluate whether or not the clue is helpful and where it is most effective in the interrogations. This game's major innovation lies in the interrogation of the suspects (400 actors were used to provide facial expressions for the game), so recognition of emotional states becomes important in evaluating witnesses. On the plus side, the game has more interaction than is standard in terms of character; but I understand that all gamers don't like this. In fact an experienced gamer told us, "I'm sick of talking to people. I wanna go back to killing them."

On the negative side, as with the driving through the neighborhoods

The lead cop, Phelps, keeps a casebook in *LA Noire* - a written diary for every case which lists locations, people, and clues, and which acts as a navigational device in the game. It also acts, much like the surveillance techniques of *Dragnet* to reduce human interaction to quantifiable data and to organize and validate what the film noir proper terms "snitching."

Le jour se leve: an older noir style with flashbacks and subjectivity, not like a police procedural.

Fighting in *LA Noire*. Violence in the game is never initiated by the LAPD. It is always the response of a beleaguered and attacked police

and streets, even though the characters seem to be real, interaction with them always takes the form of interrogation. That is, interaction is based around control. It is simply "Are they telling you the truth about the murder or not?" You are not interacting with them as persons but only as witnesses or potential suspects. Such interrogation also represents the law as cold and objective, concerned only with what happened, whereas film noir is concerned with more than just what happened; it is concerned with characters' subjectivity. I just finished writing about *Le jour se leve*, the French beginning of what would be called film noir in 1939, and it's about a character flashing back and is entirely concerned with his subjectivity. The noir period of 1945-50 really focused on this. The subjectivity of the noir films, as Paul Arthur points out, was replaced by the objectivity of the police procedural. This game follows that pattern.

K: In layman's terms, it's the difference between facts and truth. The game wants just the facts while noir is usually concerned with the truth, in a broad sense.

D: Yes, as the theme is developed in what I now consider to be an early noir, Renoir's film *The Crime of Monsieur Lang*, the difference between the law and justice – that gap. I don't think we see that gap so much here. Although the game features multiple characters, it has a "just the facts, ma'am" approach to them.

The third thing I wanted to talk about is the importance of narrative. Narrative is much more complicated and complex in this game. I'm not an expert in these games but it seems that rather than collecting items, you're collecting elements of a story. It's a fairly complex story about Cole Phelps [the central character] moving up from Patrolman, to where I thought it would have ended in Homicide – but he gets busted back down and then he finishes in Arson. That adds complexity. Also, the game does expose some corruption on the police force and some corruption in terms of municipal development at the time. And it focuses on the crucial idea of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which is a big part of what's going on – and what the game suggests is a big part of crime in LA – soldiers being released back onto the streets, which has a current flavor in terms of soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.

K: One of the non-police main characters is Dr. Harlan Fontaine, a psychiatrist who treats PTSD and its symptoms in numerous veterans. He turns out to be the main villain due to his involvement in land schemes, as well as reprogramming minor characters *Manchurian-Candidate*-style in a variety of nefarious political machinations. He's got this innocent public face and like every great villain, he ends up being the devil himself.

D: The game does some placing of a generalized scheme of corruption in Los Angeles in the 1940s: the development corporation builds houses but also burns houses down. There's also the serial killer, the

force. The gamer is rewarded with a trophy for shootings of the populace.

Character interrogation. African American characters, like Nate Wilkey (pictured right) are primarily suspects or presented in a servile fashion, not on the cops' level.

He Walked By Night. Noir stalwart Anthony Mann took over the direction of the film late in the shooting and changed the meaning of the final chase sequence in a sewer by, in a way that recalled Fritz Lang's *M*, highlighting the hunted and desperate quality of the mentally disturbed killer, rather than focusing exclusively on the police.
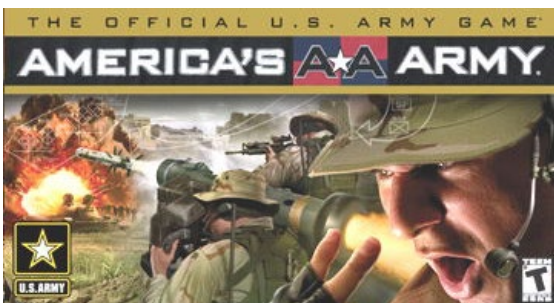
Werewolf, whose identity (spoiler alert) is discovered by the police but can't be made public because of his relation to a high-ranking politician. The finale in the LA sewers recalls a crucial noir, *He Walked by Night* (1948) and, spoiler alert again, makes it difficult to have a sequel to *LA Noire*. *He Walked by Night* was the transition film to the police procedural, in which the climactic chase in the sewers is filmed from the point-of-view of the killer, as the audience is aligned with the outside-the-law character and not the police.

K: In *LA Noire*, there's no change of perspective.

D: That goes along with what Toby Miller mentions in his article on the university and electronic games[1]. [open endnotes in new window]He says that in the U.S. Army's videogame *America's Army*, the player can never "sympathize" with anyone outside their unit. That's another key idea in *LA Noire*—never to be sympathizing with anyone outside of the police department. Now, there could be corrupt cops but in general, we are aligned with the police force for better or worse.

K: And the corrupt cops are just as bad as the criminals. When you're with Phelps, he supposedly has a higher moral authority within the game to ferret out the corruption.

D: I want to make one point about where the narrative goes: this game is based on an *L.A. Confidential*-view of Los Angeles. Like that film, it still unfortunately uses what Barthes calls inoculation—that is, the idea of exposing some corruption in order to let the major corruption continue.[2] For example, we do get some idea of what the L.A. land grab is, what's going on, but we don't get an idea of how the city is really being remade. We also get some idea of corrupt cops. But one thing the game does not touch is the situation between the police department and the neighborhoods, in particular Latino communities, which is about to surface as a crucial issue, or black communities. I remember in the game one African-American male is being interrogated and he's an honest guy, you trust him and you might read that as "honest," but underneath it may be he's completely terrified— the game doesn't care whether you read that or not. This game is set in 1947, midway between the Zoot Suit Riots,[3] which the LAPD joined and participated in, and a 1951 incident called "Bloody Christmas," which entailed another beating of a Latino, with no hint of this tension. (Spoiler alert again). Even Roy Earle's presentation at the funeral tells the truth about Phelps, though Earle (one of Phelps' ex-partners in the game) is a corrupt cop. So there's a strange discourse: Phelps is correctly eulogized and, as you said, he's the member of the police force we can trust. Again, that's inoculation.

K: But trust only goes so far because the Phelps character is willing to go beyond what normal protocol would say that you can do to accomplish things. Based on the flashback backstory of his time as an Army lieutenant on Okinawa, he committed a war crime yet rationalized it as "war, for the greater good"; other platoon members argued with him at the time. But he still committed a war crime, no matter how you look at it. And here he is, "a war hero," going quickly up the ranks of the LAPD in part due to his "decision-making ability." So you have to wonder if the game wants you to believe that war crimes may pay dividends.

D: Likewise, Jack Kelso, an investigator from the District Attorney's office and Phelps' fellow officer in the Army, also doesn't follow procedure. That gets into another area that's just coming into film noir at this point, via multiple adaptations of Mickey Spillane (*I, the Jury*-1953, for example). Noir features not the sympathetic outside-the-law character but the vigilante cop, who goes beyond the legal bounds of the law in order to do his job better and whose own reckless use of the law is now validated, a big part of L.A. noir lore.

K: Along with the vigilante cop and the outside-the-law character is another protagonist in noir, as you've written about, the returning veteran with all of his emotional baggage. How does that figure resonate in the game?

D: That was a subseries of the noir film, the returning veteran. Those films were generally done by mostly left directors in very interesting ways: Mankiewicz's *Somewhere in the Night* (1946), Curtis Bernhardt's *High Wall* (1947) and there were a few more, like Bogart played a returning vet in *Dead Reckoning* (1947), and they have memory disorders. To me, that is brought on by the trauma of the war. Or sometimes it's brought on not by the trauma of the war but by returning to the homefront and finding an atomized homefront, as their relationships break down, when during the war you actually had more collective relationships. *LA Noire* doesn't pick that up at all.

K: Let's talk for a minute about the globalization of the game. *LA Noire* was developed over the course of several years by an Australian game company, Team Bondi, before being published by Rockstar Games, the U.S. publisher of such bestsellers as *Red Dead Redemption* and the *Grand Theft Auto* series. It's unique that a non-American company would be creating a game based on such a short time period and specific place. It seems to me that the surface details are right, the lingo of the time is right, like "putting the Broderick on him." It's a fairly good representation of the verbal and visual record of the time. Game companies are all over the world, designing games that are set in other places than those studios – like Ubisoft Montreal doing the *Assassin's Creed* series set in the Middle East in the Middle Ages and Renaissance Italy, a company in Romania designing boxing games for the Wii and other platforms – so it's interesting how that globalization aspect works.

D: There's a kind of global and local to look at here. Globally, the streets of L.A. have a mythic significance, thus a team in Australia can use the Internet to do this fairly meticulous reconstruction, and it can reach a level of having slang, argot, that kind of thing. But what it misses, again, is the real feel of a neighborhood, of the tangible aspects of neighborhood culture in '40s L.A., other than the commodified culture of signs and movie marquees reflexively advertising *The Big Sleep* and *The Lady from Shanghai*. The markers are not deep cultural markers but very superficial. So you have a global knowledge base that is locally impoverished, which I think goes along with our dialectic examination of the game.

K: My last notion is that there is a difference between contemporary "games" and the grander sort of "interactive experience." Let me set

Uncharted 2: Among Thieves feels like a theatrical experience, especially when the hero moves through the huge underground cavern. The game looks good on a 46" television set.

the stage. In *Uncharted 2: Among Thieves*, Nathan Drake is an Indiana Jones-like adventurer who is searching for the lost treasure of Shangri-La in the Himalayas. He's arrived at another of the many tests, or puzzles that function as skill tests in this series, an underground cavern that is enormous beyond any scope I can describe. It's huge. Gargantuan. Hundreds of yards long and deeper than that. Drake has to do all these tricky little things to get from one side to the other, pick up an object and return. It takes hours to learn the right combinations – but you don't feel like it's a game because all around you is what looks like a set from a *Raiders* film or a Bond film. I have a projector and a 46" television so the comparison is apt, that these viewing options make the game look like more than a game, ratcheting it up to a theatrical experience. It's not a game anymore. I'm in that vast cavern with Drake, feeling the vertigo with him and the fear.

D: And *LA Noire* is attempting to do that, too.

K: Right. These aren't traditional games like *Pac-Man* or even *Super Mario World*. They're more immersive and cinematic than traditional games.

Vigilante P.I.Mike Hammer dispensing "justice" in the Mickey Spillane adaptation *I, the Jury*.

Robert Taylor's tortured vet in *The High Wall*. A feature of the vet's anxiety in many of the noir films was the veteran's having to face the atomized competitiveness of a greedy capitalist landscape after the collective experience of the war.

D: Relating to your point, Jonathan Beller discusses the "Attention Economy."[4] [open endnotes in new window] He deals with how visual media grabs and retains attention and how this cinematic and now internet system works. We've talked a little about attention grabbing in terms of the military-industrial complex, where, as Miller points out, this attention is then focused as a training ground for indoctrination, training, and recruiting.

K: He uses the example from the film *The Last Starfighter* (1986) and how the military "borrowed" the title from the game to give their recruitment caché.

D: If we apply Miller's point, *LA Noire* is the domestic equivalent of the military's occupying foreign countries, in terms of patrolling domestic streets. In addition, as more and more countries outlaw actual war games, these virtual games have taken on a new importance for purposes of training. You pointed out an article to me recently that there will soon be drone flights in U.S. domestic airspace.

K: Yes, simulators and simulation. The most popular games for the Xbox and PlayStation 3 are war games: the *Call of Duty* series and *Battleground* series. *Call of Duty 3* came out the same week as *Uncharted 3* and sold three times as many game units, amounting to a billion dollars in sales. In a week. Worldwide.

D: That's amazing. And when you think of how far we've come from, say, the brilliant sequence at the beginning of *Born on the Fourth of July* (1992), with the two kids on Long Island growing up and playing soldier as a part of maturation, to how people now are continually socialized to be playing these games at all ages and hours of the day all around the country, the intensification is extraordinary.

I think that where *LA Noire* fits into the military-industrial-entertainment complex is that it's training for domestic action. It trains you in how to look at a neighborhood, how to interrogate a neighborhood, how to drive through it in order to get immediately what you want out of it and then leave. The streets of L.A. here are occupied territory. It's the gamer who is the occupier, in a sense.

K: Usually in the games like *Call of Duty* that we were talking about, you don't interact with the people you're "supposed to be" shooting. You shoot them from a distance and never talk to them at all.

D: That's the *Dragnet* perspective where everyone is a suspect. Not a person, not a worker but a suspect. Let's look again at the game being an immersive experience. Beller, in talking about the Attention Economy, has this to say:

> "The new commodity being sold in the Attention Economy

Police shootout in *Grand Theft Auto*, one of the progenitors of *LA Noire* by the same company, Rockstar.

Image from *Born on the Fourth of July*, the opening sequence of which details the interpolation of the young U.S. male into the war machine, an interpolation now being continued in games like *Call of Duty*.

Call of Duty is a game which is careful not to offer any sympathy to or understanding of those who are being annihilated.

is productive power. The cinematic century posited that looking could be treated as a value-producing labor. The digital age presupposes it."

So it costs a certain amount to buy the game and then you're immersed in it—but I also think it's training for the Attention Economy. That is, I think it's training you in how to evaluate something. We can talk about how (commercial Hollywood) cinema was about grabbing your attention and keeping it for a while and now it's much wider in terms of attention-grabbing. Now, grabbing attention and keeping it generates profit directly. That's what [sites like] Facebook are about, what its impending offering as a public company (IPO) which could value it at $100 billion will be about.

K: YouTube, with one-to-five-minute videos, speaks to a short attention span, but then you watch ten or twenty of them in a row so you're watching the equivalent of a full-length film but the attention is more scattered and malleable.

D: So how might we see the game as contributing to or fitting into the Attention Economy? To this idea of producing its own value by grabbing attention?

K: Practically, there's a number of different ways. Some games now will sell product placements within the game and, for example, driving games have a high replay value. Every time you cross the finish line on a lap, you'll see the giant Bridgestone sign right there. A game company will have product placements in their games, of course, to break even financially before the game ships but also to make the experience for the player more "real," serving the same purpose as the surface detail in *LA Noire*.

In terms of focusing and maintaining attention, these games have many playable levels. *LA Noire* has sixty cases spread across five levels plus additional downloadable cases. Some are short and some are very long. There are difficulty settings, which affect gameplay. In the *Uncharted* series, there are five difficulty settings. You play it through the first time and get a few of the rewards. Finally a hundred hours later, you play it through at the highest difficulty and maybe you have all the rewards. And if not, you may feel compelled to spend another 20-30 hours going through it again. Sometimes you get the books that you have to buy separately from the game, which are an extra twenty dollars on top of the sixty-to-seventy for the game itself.

D: Can we say also that what it's doing is training you in a particular way of looking, of clicking-on, of interacting quickly—essentially like the Hollywood action film—of scanning a shot to get what you need from it and then your attention goes elsewhere. So it reinforces what a lot of the Internet does, as well as its predecessor, the cinema, in the action cutting in the Hollywood summer blockbuster. It furthers the idea of quickly draining the shot, the game interaction, the Internet screen of all meaning and then moving on to the next thing. Attention

no longer is the precondition for reflection, it is now its opposite. It's something where there's a shiny object in front of you, you spot the shiny object, you make it a trophy, and then you get onto the next shiny object.

K: Media observers talk about how games have replaced the cinema, or movies in general, as one of the go-to entertainment outlets for people. People have the choice of either spending twenty dollars for two hours at say IMAX movies or going to GameStop and buying a used game for twenty dollars and getting fifty or more hours out of it.

D: More bang for your buck. There used to be that dynamic between television and movies. Why would anyone go out to see a movie when you can stay home and get one for free? Now you can get many more hours in the game than you could in a movie. That's a reason for games to move to be more immersive, more like movies.

K: Almost every game that comes out now has the capability for multi-player or co-op[erative] play. Every platform connects to the Internet and you can play your games with (or against) anybody in the world who gets online to join you. That drives the game on for another hundred hours on top of the single-player time you spend with it.

D: That's a great segueway because the last thing I'd like to mention is how to view the game in terms of the dialectic of cognitive capital. On one side is the proposition that we are completely subsumed, the spectacle is everything, and along with this the idea that online gamers perform unpaid labor. The more commodified term for this is "prosumer"—a combination of producer and consumer—which implies that the typical passive consumer has now become a more active participant in his/her own entertainment. But underneath that term is perhaps simply a further delusion since the "participation" is often at a rather minimal level. To combat industry language, there is now an alternate term, "produsage," defined as an extreme form of exploitation where the users work for free and are completely exploited.[5]

On the other hand, you have the opposite pole, which is Marx's idea of the general intellect. That is, that the game is a way of communicating: you can plug it into the Internet, you can play with other players so that what you're doing, really, is you're building knowledge. And you're building it collectively. One of the interesting things we did in terms of the game is that since we didn't have enough time to play every case, we watched patches on YouTube. These patches featured other people playing through the game, sometimes with their comments and that was a part of our experience of it.

So there's a sense of collectively generating knowledge about the game. On the other hand, there's also that sense we've talked about where what you're doing is reinforcing an already dominant ideology. It's unlikely that you're going to exceed the limits of the game in that communication. Another thing is that you're creating the market for

The Cognitariat at work.

The proletariat at work at Foxconn, Shanghai, creating the instrument on which the Cognitariat practices its more rarefied functions. The practices of this group of workers are often ignored by media theorists who respond only to the surplus labor hidden in the media object, in this case, in the computer game.

Workers of the Digital (and Financial) World Unite.

another game, or at least the taste for another game. So perhaps it is more "produsage" than "prosumer." The "prosumer" is someone who stops just being a consumer and becomes at least in part an active producer, while the "produsage" individual works for capital for free. That's the question I pose to you, being an experienced gamer.

K: Why, thank you!

D: There does seem to be a great deal of pleasure in this. Is there also an amount of what Adorno might see as the information economy imprinting its specific patterns of work on subjectivity, along with a certain degree of just zoning out? Is this "produsage" just reifying one's place in a now alienated on- and offline world?

K: I think so. I'll impugn one game that I played, *Assassin's Creed*. I'm really into the Middle Ages and the Crusades. I've read a number of research books about the Templars and that era. I got the game thinking, I can play a game in which I can return to the time of the Crusades! But it's not that. It's got a high-tech storyline about a contemporary guy who accesses the consciousness of his ancestor in the Middle Ages. And what does that have to do with experiencing the time period? I have to collect 400 flags from the four sections of the game. I got close to a hundred hours into it—having been entranced by ancient Damascus and Tyre—before I realized that it was more rote work and I stopped playing it. Some games have so much repetitive action that they really will drive you insane.

Let's talk about another term mentioned in relation to cognitive capital, the cognitariat, which includes game producers and how they drive gaming. One side drives the war simulations, like the ones at the University of Southern California, while another side drives *LA Noire*, and another side drives Zynga games on Facebook. It's the same cognitariat broken up into a lot of small groups.

D: The other thing about the cognitariat is that that phrase often doesn't include the people who make the game, and they need to be included in these discussions. The production of the game, as we're just finding out with Apple now, may be farmed out to third world production centers in China, for example, because there's an awful lot of work in terms of the modeling that went into this. An awful lot of *that* work is a kind of outsourced grunt work. Not just coding but all of the things that need to go into producing the games, and the unbelievable number of shots that are in this game. But that cognitariat isn't usually talked about because of the class differences so that you have, as Naomi Klein relates in *No Logo*, the case of a woman in the Philippines who makes computers but can't use one.

K: Along those lines, I read about an "underground economy" of teens and twenty-somethings in Asian countries who go to Internet cafes, using several computers at the same time, playing *World of Warcraft* or some other massive multiplayer online roleplaying game (MMORPG), mining the game elements to then sell to the hardcore

gamers in the West for cash. That's another form of a cognitariat based on global inequality, which, instead of being able to enjoy the game, is forced to find loopholes in the economy that they can exploit.

D: Very often, the cognitariat is not discussed at the level you're describing but more along a privileged upper level and that's the problem and the need for re-voicing that term.

Go to Notes page

Notes

1. Miller, Toby. "For Fun, For Profit, For Empire: the University and Electronic Games" in *Cognitive Capitalism, Education and Digital Labor*, ed. Michael A. Peters and Ergin Bulut, New York: Peter Lang, 2011. P 229-244. [return to page 3 of essay]

2. Barthes in *Mythologies* (translated by Annette Lavers, London, Paladin, 1972) gives many examples of the way inoculation is used to maintain power, perhaps most prominently is the state's acknowledging of political scandals to divert citizens away from any examination of the systemic frauds of the state and in the current Wall Street's "fessing up" to its "shortcomings" as a way of making sure that no actual structural changes occur.

3. These were a series of riots in 1943 between white sailors and Marines stationed throughout the city and Latino youths recognizable by their zoot suits. The riots were a class eruption in LA in which Mexican immigrant laborers attempted to assert a new visibility. The LAPD in some limited cases joined the white service men but more generally looked the other way, and allowed the beatings to the Latino workers to occur. (See Mark Reisler, *By the sweat of their brow: Mexican immigrant labor in the United States, 1900-1940*. Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1976).

4. Beller, Jonathan. *The Cinematic Mode of Production: Attention Economy and the Society of the Spectacle.* Hanover, New Hampshire: Dartmouth College Press, 2006. [return to page 4]

5. See Peters and Bulut reference footnote 1.
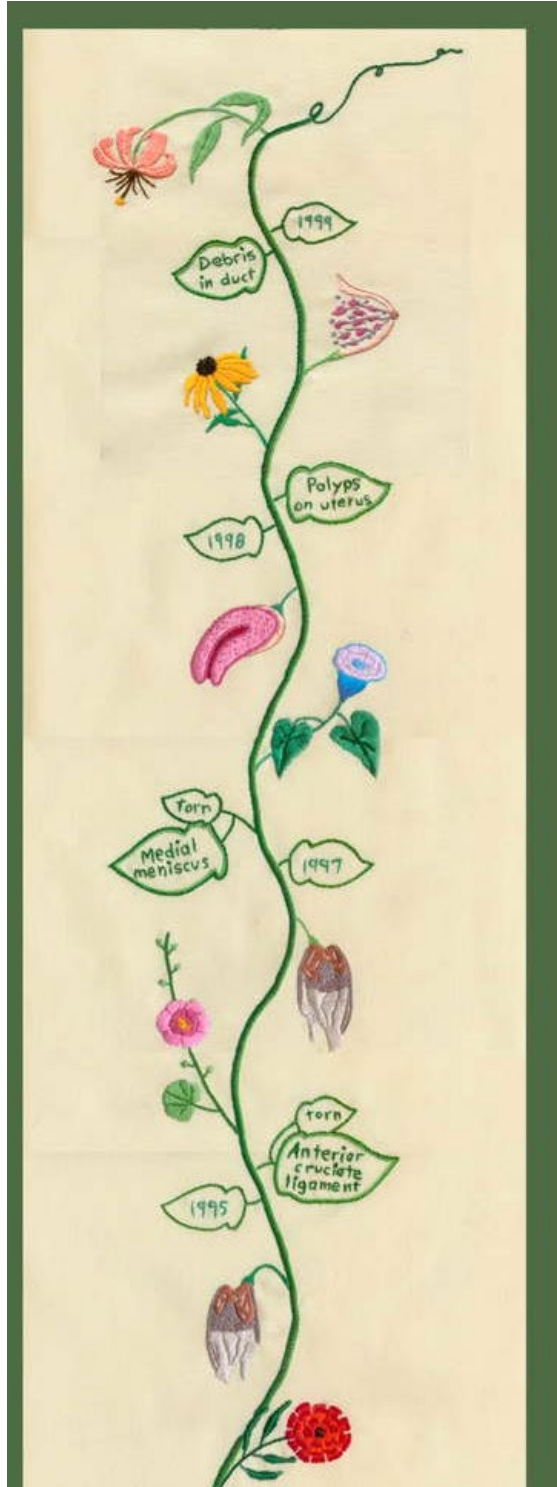
"Making it through": sickness and health in Su Friedrich's *The Odds of Recovery*

by William C. Wees

> "Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship in the kingdom of the well and the kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer to use only the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place."
> —Susan Sontag, *Illness as a Metaphor*

> "If we lump all surgical procedures together your chances of making it through are considerably better than 95 out of 100. It could be said, however, that for the 5 out of the 100 who did not survive, the odds were pretty bad."
> —Edward L. Bradley III, M.D., *A Patient's Guide to Surgery*

Before undertaking her critical analysis of the myths, metaphors and other literary conceits and mystifications surrounding the physical realities of tuberculosis and cancer, Susan Sontag insists that the point she wishes to make in *Illness as Metaphor* is that

> "illness is *not* a metaphor, and that the most truthful way of regarding illness—and the healthiest way of being ill—is one most purified of, most resistant to, metaphorical thinking."[1] [open endnotes in new window]

I suspect Su Friedrich would agree. Certainly her 65-minute film *The Odds of Recovery* (2002) presents her medical problems with prosaic, non-metaphorical, clinical clarity. [2] This is not to say, however, that "metaphorical thinking" has no role to play in Friedrich's account of her many years of alternating illness and recovery. In fact, as we will see, the film's organization and argument depend on Friedrich's willingness to draw upon both "truthful" and "metaphorical" ways of engaging with the realities of sickness and health.

As a recurrent citizen of "the kingdom of the sick," Friedrich appears in front of the camera for substantial portions of her film: checking in at hospitals, filling out forms, struggling with hospital gowns, meeting with doctors, undergoing examinations, displaying the scars of her
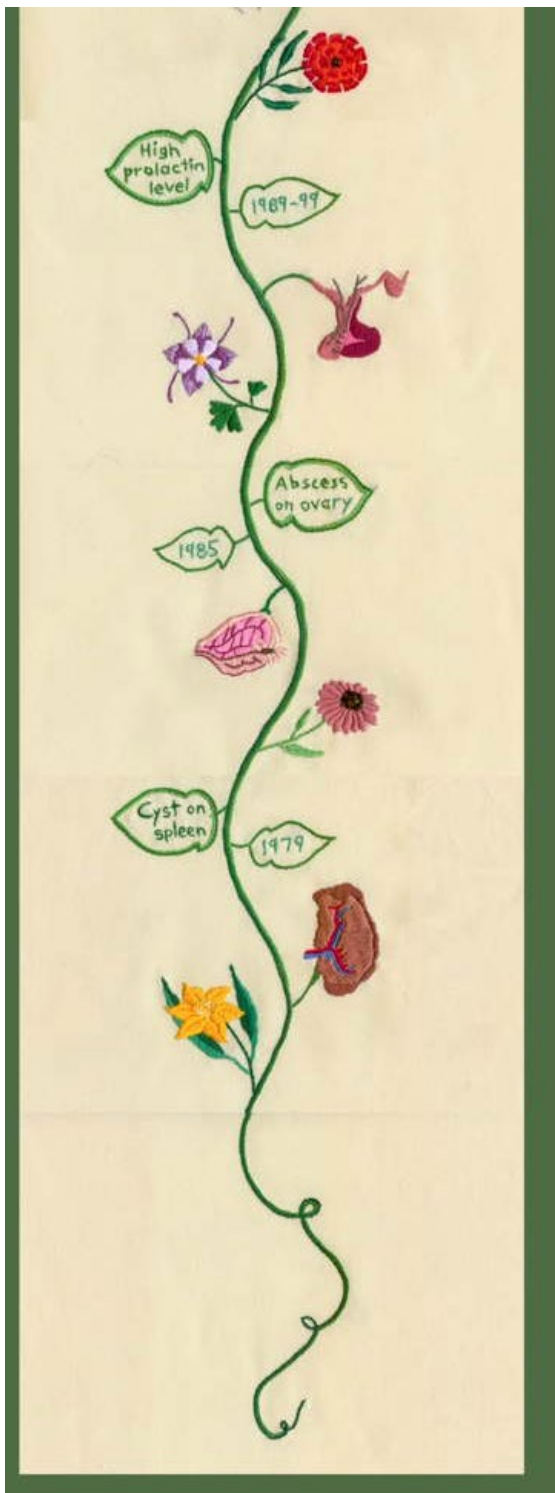
The embroidered vine provides the imagery for a long credit sequence at the end of the film. The camera moves "up" the vine from the first to the last operation and to one last flower and the tip of the vine

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various surgeries, submitting to the intimidating diagnostic machinery of modern medicine. Through intertitles, voice-over, and direct address to the camera, and with varying degrees of objectivity, bemusement, frustration, and anger, Friedrich recounts the history of her six operations and a ten-year effort to reduce her body's over-production of the hormone prolactin. Woven into this narrative is an account of her diminished sex life and strained relationship with her partner due to the physiological and psychological consequences of multiple operations and too much prolactin in her system. Throughout the film, as Janet Cutler has written about Friedrich's films in general,

> "You can sense the filmmaker thinking through the possible ways to proceed, drawing parallels and making connections between otherwise unrelated images and sounds, encouraging the viewer to follow a line of thought to the point at which a new idea or a new understanding emerges." [3]

Combining documentary and experimental techniques, Friedrich presents a candid and often unflattering portrait of the artist as victim of "a revolving-door relationship with the medical establishment" due to her body's failure to remain consistently healthy. [4] But in a parallel "kingdom of the well," the filmmaker goes about her everyday activities: shopping, cooking, reading, bathing, practicing t'ai chi movements, gardening, and embroidering. The last two make the most important contributions to the film's imagery and meaning. The garden is on a roof adjoining a loft in Brooklyn that Friedrich shared with her partner and several roommates. The embroidery records her medical history in the form of a sinuous vine of colorful blossoms and equally colorful, but anatomically correct, representations of the parts of Friedrich's body that have required surgery. The garden not only represents the antithesis of the sterile, uninviting, monochromatic, and slightly claustrophobic mise-en-scène of hospital hallways, doctors' offices, examining rooms, and paraphernalia of medical technology, but it also provides the filmmaker with imagery of the changing seasons and the natural cycles of life, death and regeneration. The vine, which we see Friedrich embroidering as the film progresses, documents the medical traumas Friedrich's body suffers at the same time that it becomes a visual metaphor for continuity and growth. (I will have more to say about the implications of the embroidered vine in my conclusion.)

At the outset, Friedrich faced three formidable problems in making *The Odd of Recovery*:

- how to contain her erratic medical history within a formal structure that would allow her to represent the real-life experiences that inspired the film but distill those experiences into a unified work of art;
- how to avoid exhibitionism while putting her body on display; and, finally,
- how to avoid easy appeals for sympathy while engaging the viewer empathetically in her tale of ill-health.

She solved the first problem by adapting the "here-we-go-again" saga of her operations to a repeated pattern of formal elements that, despite differences in detail, give the story of each operation a similar shape within the chronological structure of the film. The account of the first operation establishes a theme and subsequent accounts of the other operations offer variations on that theme. The theme-and-variation structure helps to hold the film together while, at the same time, allowing diverse—and even discordant—elements to fit within the film's narrative as it moves from one operation to the next.

To address the risks of exhibitionism and sentimentality, Friedrich drew upon several strategies to establish a critical distance between herself as filmmaker and herself as autobiographical subject. These include constantly varying the tone or mood of the film by intercutting images from the kingdoms of the well and the sick, by making extensive use of intertitles to provide information as well as moments of humor and self-revelation, and by complementing her own on-camera comments with a medley of other voices on the soundtrack: the receptionists, nurses, technicians and doctors Friedrich must deal with during her numerous trips to hospitals, as well as a variety of anonymous male and female voices reading extracts from texts that range from *A Patient's Guide to Surgery* to *T'ai Chi Ch'uan Principles and Practices* to *Getting the Love You Want* to *The Science of Breath*. The cumulative effect of these strategies is to undercut the impression of Friedrich as the film's unique, unified subject and unmediated object of the camera's gaze. As the film's protagonist, she exists within a matrix of personal concerns and larger, social contexts that come with her role as reluctant citizen of "that other place" of ill-health.

The combination of techniques Friedrich deploys in her cinematic presentation of selfhood places her film among those Michael Renov identified as "the new autobiography in film and video." The "new autobiographies" are works of "self-inscription" that are notable for their "construction of subjectivity as a site of instability," where "the domain of the subject and that of the enveloping world are mutually constitutive."[5]. Along the same lines, Susanna Egan has argued that "film may enable autobiographers to define and represent subjectivity not as singular or solipsistic but as multiple and as revealed in relationship."[6]

And, in his book-length study of the autobiographical documentary, Jim Lane recognized that in the wake of poststructuralist theory,

> "an emphasis on the weakening of the referent, coupled with the decentering of particularized social subjects, reflects a 'constructed' view of the autobiographical subject, a view that has played a central role in autobiographical criticism across literature, film, still photography, painting and other media."

While the new forms of selfhood made possible by the autobiographical documentary "do not imply a universalist application," Lane writes, "if they are rigorously conceived, they can argue a position on society and the culture at large." [7] The autobiographical subject can bear broader, social significance if represented through means such as those adopted by Friedrich for *The*

Odds of Recovery. [8] Those means are, I hope to show, "rigorously conceived" and effectively executed in her "single-person-produced filmic autobiography." [9]

Scars

Friedrich works on her vine embroidery. The room's colors and furnishings and quality of light are in strong contrast to those of the hospital.

The film's theme-and-variation structure involves comparable uses of sound, images and intertitles. Each account of an operation begins with a voice-over providing a textbook description of the part of the body requiring surgery. In chronological order of the operations, they are the spleen (a large cyst), the ovaries (an abscess), a ligament in one knee (damaged while skiing), cartilage in the other knee (general wear-and-tear: "Was it," Friedrich asks in an intertitle, "the tennis or the African dance class?"), the uterus (polyps), and one breast ("something in my ducts," Friedrich explains in an intertitle). The last operation receives considerably more attention that any of the previous ones, but thanks to photographs, medical records, and narrative details in intertitles, each operation is vividly and cinematically realized. In each case, as well, we see Friedrich working on her embroidered version of the spleen, ovaries, knee ligaments, and so on. Accompanied by a leaf indicating the year of the operation, each object of an operation appears in chronological order among the vine's more conventional flowers and leaves.

In contrast to the embroidered vine's floral chronology of the operations, purely factual, impersonal intertitles identify each operation as if they were labels on Friedrich's medical files: "Operation number one: November 20, 1977, age 22," "Operation number two: July 23, 1985, age 31," etc., concluding with "Operation number six: October 15, 1999, age 44." While we do not see the actual operations, we do see photographs or filmed images of the resulting scars. [10] [open endnotes in new window] "You're a great healer, that scar really faded," a doctor tells Friedrich. The same, however, cannot be said of the psychological scars. As Friedrich says in an intertitle following her third operation,

> "A year passed. The scars healed. But I was a wreck."
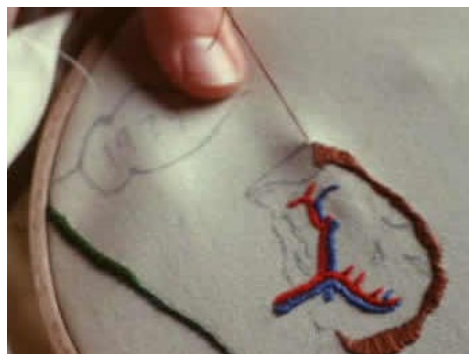
Friedrich embroiders the spleen for her "vine of operations."

A photograph of the scar left from the operation on Friedrich's spleen.

Along with images of the scars, Friedrich supplies closure for each operation's mini-narrative by reading (in voice-over) from the official medical report on the surgery. After some detailed, technical information about specific surgical procedures, all the reports conclude with formulaic phrases that serve as increasingly ironic refrains:

- "The patient tolerated the procedure well. Estimated blood loss was about 500 ccs. The patient was sent to the recovery room in a satisfactory condition."
- "The patient is taken to the recovery room in satisfactory condition."
- "The patient was then placed in a knee extension brace and brought to the recovery room in good condition."
- "The patient was brought to the recovery room in good condition."
- "The patient was transferred to the recovery room in satisfactory condition having tolerated the procedure well."
- "The wound is sterilely dressed and the patient, having tolerated the procedure well, is brought to the recovery room in good condition."

Thus the medical establishment regularly welcomes "the patient" back to the kingdom of the well. Friedrich leaves us to reflect upon the gap between the pain

and anxiety she undergoes with each operation and the dispassionate, impersonal, and self-assured resolution offered by the medical establishment.

When the trauma of surgery is not involved, Friedrich's passage from sickness to health is slower but profoundly more satisfying. Following operation number three, a voice-over provides information about the pituitary gland, and a close-up shows Friedrich's needle and thread creating her embroidered version of that gland. One of the hormones produced by the pituitary gland, we learn from the voice-over, is prolactin, which characteristically increases after women give birth and, consequently, is associated with lactation and a decrease in sexual desire. During an appointment with her doctor Friedrich says that a blood test in 1989 revealed her prolactin level to be 300; an intertitle informs us, "Normal prolactin levels range from 3 to 20." In a later sequence of intertitles Friedrich declares,

> "No wonder I cried for hours on end. No wonder I rarely wanted to
> have sex. I'd spent ten years in a post-partum condition."

Embroidering the uterus.

She takes various measures to bring down her prolactin count: acupuncture, Chinese herbal remedies, t'ai chi, a healthier diet, a prescribed medication. They gradually achieve their purpose. Subsequent intertitles chart her improvement: from 300 to 146, to 119, to 50, to 35, and finally, as she waits for still another meeting with a doctor, Friedrich looks into the camera and tells us that her "prolactin level [is] down to about 25" and adds, "I certainly feel better." In contrast to the hospital's formulaic reports on the "satisfactory condition" of "the patient," Friedrich's intertitle provides a more humane and fulfilling closure: "What a relief to have my body back." And alluding to the near breakdown of her relationship with her partner, the next intertitle reads, "And a pleasure for both of us."

Embroiders a flower for the vine.

This optimistic declaration comes after her sixth operation, a biopsy which shows that what her doctor idiomatically calls "junk" in the ducts of the breast is "totally benign." Despite this encouraging outcome, the biopsy appears to have been the most traumatic of Friedrich's six operations. It leads to her fullest exposure of the effects of an operation on her body and her emotions, and produces her fullest confession of vulnerability. Before the operation she already has misgivings. "I really, really, really, really don't want to do this," she says, before filming her reflection in a mirror. With a video camera held up to her eye she films her bare breasts, slowly zooming in on the one to be operated on. After the operation she again films herself in a mirror, removing her bra to reveal a bandage on her left breast as she talks about the operation's after-effects of swelling and pain. After some intervening shots, including one of Friedrich hearing the doctor's reassuring report on the negative results of the biopsy, Friedrich is again in front of the mirror, at which point she pulls off the bandage to reveal the partially healed incision on her breast. "Hideous" she exclaims. "I can't imagine you want to look at this. But it *has* improved." "Six days later," as an intertitle announces, she films the breast again, now bandaged with a narrower strip of tape and showing a large, brownish bruise next to the bandage. In voice-over Friedrich says,

Embroidering the breast and its ducts for the vine.

> "You know, when I look at it, I alternate between thinking, 'Poor thing,'
> and thinking, 'Uhh, you are so ugly.' And it looked so much worse
> before, but I kinda can't bear to look at it, and then I think I *should* look
> at it. I should think good thoughts about it and wish it to feel better. So,
> anyway I'm going to take this thing off and, uh, put another one on—
> maybe. I don't know. Maybe I should keep this thing covered. It feels
> very exposed."

Although she does not force us to watch as she pulls off the bandage this time, we cannot help but empathize with the physical suffering and unhappiness Friedrich's body has, again, inflicted upon her.

That empathy is burdened, however, with conflicting affective and visceral responses–as Friedrich recognizes: "I can't imagine you want to look at this." And

she shares our ambivalence: "I kinda can't bear to look at it, and then I think I *should* look at it." If she should look at it for therapeutic reasons, we should look at it as, on the one hand, a signifier of documentary authenticity literally incised on the filmmaker's body, and on the other hand, as a metonymic summation of the physical and emotional traumas Friedrich has experienced as, again and again in the course of her film/life, she has gone through the rituals of examination, operation and recovery. The culminating image of the wounded breast drives home the point that both the autobiographical credibility and the social-political relevance of the film depend upon the presence of her body on screen.

Friedrich films herself in the bathroom mirror before her breast surgery.

In front of the bathroom mirror, Friedrich films herself after the breast surgery.

The filmmaker filming herself filming herself.

Friedrich's swollen and bandaged breast several days after the surgery.

The breast approximately two weeks after the surgery.

Friedrich's reflection in the bathroom mirror during her rant about her ill heath and its consequences for her physical and mental life and her relationships.

This final image of her body's vulnerability also serves as a visual introduction to a climactic monologue in which Friedrich releases the frustrations and anxieties that have built up over her many years of operations. In a medium close-up of her head and bare shoulders, Friedrich stares balefully into the camera and declares,

"I just don't want to feel like this anymore. I don't want to go the

hospital anymore. I don't want to have any more surgery. I don't want to have any more scars. I don't want to be black and blue. I don't want to be in pain. I don't want to take Tylenol with codeine. I don't want to have my girlfriend worry about me. I don't want to have her angry at me. I don't want to ever have to ask her to take care of me when these things happen. I really don't want this to ever happen again. And I said that the last time I had surgery, and I was sure it would be the last time, and now I'm saying it again, and I feel like having it happen the last time, now that I'm saying it again doesn't mean anything either. And a year from now, I'm gonna be standing in this bathroom staring at yet another part of my body that has a scar on it. And I'm fucking sick and tired of it, and I just want to be healthy, and I want to be whole, and I don't want to have, you know, *scar, scar, scar, scar, scar, scar inside*. I just don't want any more of them."

Although it will take time for the latest scar to heal completely, this outpouring of pent-up emotions marks a turning point in the film's chronicle of operations. It signals Friedrich's renunciation of citizenship in the kingdom of the sick—though one suspects the psychological scars will never disappear completely. Nor will concerns about her health simply vanish. She will still have to deal with some unexpected bleeding from the biopsy incision; she will have a mammogram that "raised some questions" but did not lead to further surgery; she will undergo bone density tests and start taking calcium pills to guard against osteoporosis; she will face the fact that menopause looms on the horizon. ("Oh, not menopause..." she superimposes on a shot of herself sitting on an examining table as her doctor broaches the subject.) All of this suggests that the border between health and ill-health is more permeable and ill-defined than Sontag's dichotomous kingdoms of sickness and health would suggest. Seen from the perspective of disability studies, illness and wellness are relational, not antithetical. Nevertheless, in both the narrative structure and the discourse on health in *The Odds of Recovery*, Friedrich makes it clear that the appropriate closure to illness *is* recovery. With the succession of her operations at an end and her prolactin level nearly normal, Friedrich devotes the remainder of her film to a cautiously hopeful renewal of her citizenship in the kingdom of the well.

Hospital

The Odds of Recovery opens with a dark screen and the clatter and hum of a busy office–announcing, before we realize it, the institutionalized, bureaucratic structure of the health-care system. The noise continues over an extreme close-up of papers on a clipboard.

The film begins with a shot of a corner of a hospital's reception area. It's uncluttered and uninhabited space and its precise geometry of horizontals and verticals offer intimations of the hospital's alienating environment.
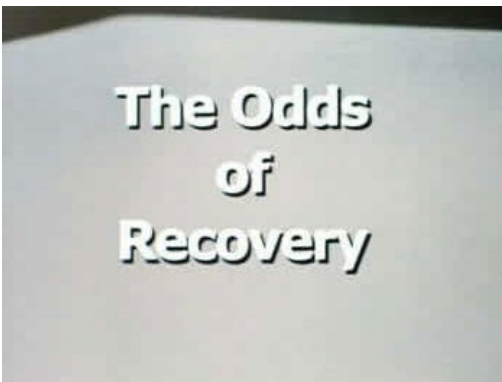
The film's title follows the opening shots of the hospital's reception area, which, like all the hospital material, was shot more-or-less clandestinely with a high-8 video camera.

Soft-focused, nearly abstract images of forms to be filled out at the reception desk suggest, perhaps, Friedrich's subjective response to the standard procedures of checking in at a hospital.

They move out of the frame, revealing a partial view of the blueish-white interior of the reception area of a hospital. A hand holding some papers crosses the frame. An

Friedrich submits impassively to an examination by a doctor reduced to arms and hands while the ubiquitous and (to the layperson) enigmatic medical instruments hang (innocently or ominously) on the wall behind her.

extreme close-up of a hospital form gives way to softly focused, abstract blue-white shapes that fill the screen as the following exchange takes place between a hospital receptionist and the filmmaker:

> "What I'm highlightin', ma'am, is just to be filled out please, so we can get a chart going on you."
> "I don't know where the health proxy chart is."
> "Right there. That's the one in your hand."
> "Well, it doesn't—oh, okay—yeah."
> "Now, the one you have in your hand, that one's gonna go in your chart."
> "Okay."
> "Then there's the other copy in the book."
> "Okay. Fine."
> "Okay, Miss Friedrich—uh, married, single, widowed, divorced?"
> "Domestic partner."
> "Okay, ma'am, when you're finished you have to take everything from the top off only, including your bra."

A cut to a neatly folded hospital gown on the seat of a chair accompanies the final instruction: "And you put that gown on." A montage sequence of Friedrich dealing with various hospital gowns follows. She puts on a gown while commenting, "I hate these things"; puts on a different gown; unfolds and examines a crackling pink paper rectangle, muttering,

> "What the fuck is this? Oh, I thought it was a robe. It's just a towel. Okay."

Friedrich in her seeming interminable struggles with hospital gowns and paper jackets.

After a brief interlude with Friedrich sitting in a chair talking with a doctor, the montage sequence continues. Friedrich awkwardly tries to reach the ties of a hospital gown dangling behind her back. She tosses a gown on an examining table and puts on her bra as she irritably says to herself (and us):

> "Get dressed. Get undressed. Get dressed. Get undressed. Eat your lunch. Wait. Get undressed again. Get dressed. I'll talk to her. I'll talk to you. She'll talk to you. I'll talk to her. We'll talk to each other."

The sequence ends as she picks up another crackling paper shape remarking, "Now it's blue. Sometimes it's pink. Sometimes it's blue. She called it a jacket. It feels like —" She puts it on and leaning toward the camera says, "You see this? It has tape so you can make it stick together." She closes the front with the tape, and with light mockery of both herself and the sterile institutional apparel she's required to wear, she poses for the camera like a fashion model as she adds with feigned delight, "See? Jacket!"

Friedrich in the embrace of the hospital's formidable, high-tech machinery.
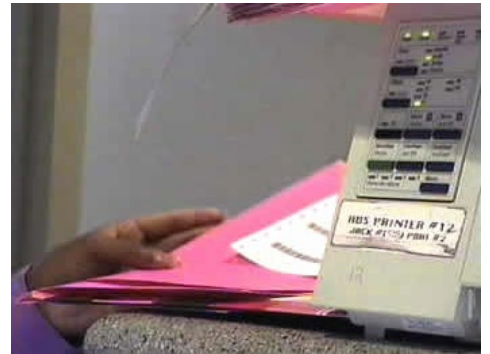
Another image of the hospital's modern technology.

From the opening of the film, Friedrich shows herself to be unhappily familiar with the role she has to play within the power structure of institutionalized health care. The physical manifestation of that power structure is the hospital, and with a High-8 video camera Friedrich surreptitiously captures the hospital's spaces and sounds, its generic furniture and enigmatic equipment, its rituals of checking in, answering questionnaires, filling out forms, submitting to the indignities of hospital gowns and "jackets" ("just all planned humiliation" she complains after another struggle with a hospital gown), and meeting with doctors who may or may not provide the information and useful advice she needs.

Friedrich waiting for breast surgery accompanied by the ever-present machinery of modern medicine.

Friedrich declaring to the camera she is carrying down a hospital hall, "I hate hospitals."

Friedrich's unorthodox and relatively low-tech method of recording sounds and images in hospitals produces a sense of intimacy and immediacy in her presentation of her many encounters with the structural and human components of the health-care system. It also contributes a distinct visual style to the hospital footage. As the film's opening images indicate, Friedrich was able to bring her small video camera into the hospital and, holding it in her hand or setting it down on a counter or desk, film, in close-up detail, the charts and paperwork that go along with checking in at the hospital. (If asked, she simply pretended that the camera wasn't turned on.) At the same time, she could record the ensuing conversations and the accompanying ambient sound. For examinations and consultations, she set up the camera before the doctor arrived. In most cases, the camera seems to have been placed about waist-high, so that the framing allows us to see Friedrich only from chest to knees as she sits on a chair or the edge of an examining table. Frequently the doctor is not visible at all, or appears only as a shoulder and arm or a back at the edge of the frame. This "weird framing," as Friedrich has called it, contributes to the film's representation of the hospital as an impersonal, alienating environment.[11] Born of necessity, the framing has the effect of a conscious strategy to reduce the sense of Friedrich as a whole person and to de-personalize the doctors and eliminate face-to-face, human contact in the patient-doctor relationship. The cumulative effect is to make the hospital seem inhospitable, a public-private space designed to maintain the patient's subservient role in the power structure of the medical establishment.

Nevertheless, thanks to the medical system, Friedrich survived six operations.[12] Significantly, her critique of the system does not seem intended to expose its failures in order to argue for reforms (à la Michael Moore), but rather to make its workings visible through the lens of her own experience, to document one person's exposure to the system and the toll it takes on her physical and psychological well-being. The entrenched, private health-care system is presented as a given with a set of variables over which the individual has little, if any, control. As filmmaker-patient, Friedrich offers her own point of view on how those variables affect her survival within the policies and practices of the health-care system, but it is impossible to ignore the implications for anyone else who must enter the kingdom of the sick.

If Friedrich is hard on the health-care system, she is also hard on herself. Her presentation of herself is not especially kind or ingratiating. She makes no effort to hide the fact that she can be impatient and even slightly paranoid when, for example, she has to deal with the standard hospital gown. As noted earlier, she blames "planned humiliation" for her difficulty in figuring out how to tie the gown's strings properly: "They make it in such a way there's no way to tie it so you're not hanging out," she asserts. But when she finally succeeds, she grimly states, "I'll do it so well they won't be able to get into it—get to me." A long sigh follows, signifying her recognition of the futility of her little gesture of rebellion against the system, while at the same time eliciting the viewer's empathetic recognition of the endless humiliations and frustrations of those who must submit to the prescribed routines of the health-care system.

Equally revealing is a short sequence in which Friedrich, wearing the ubiquitous hospital gown and visible only from waist to knees, paces back and forth in front of the camera as she berates herself for forgetting to set the camera on record when a nurse came in for a pre-screening before her biopsy. Friedrich says,

Examples of the "weird framing" resulting from Friedrich's having to set up the camera before her sessions with doctors and nurses.

"What I wanted to do was to record what a bitch I was with her because I'm so angry about how they never keep the charts and never—you know—don't even read them."

At another point we see Friedrich getting off an examining table and pleading with an off-screen nurse, "Please don't let this doctor make me wait longer. I just can't bear it." And a little later, as Friedrich walks down a hospital hallway, she looks down into the camera and declares, "I hate hospitals." Does that say more about hospitals or about her? Certainly it is a self-revelatory moment, capsulizing her frustration with her enforced submission to the hospital's implacable regime. And through the representation of herself within that regime, Friedrich most clearly illustrates the degree to which autobiographical subjectivity derives from the intersection of, as Renov puts it, "the domain of the subject and that of the enveloping world."

Garden

A brightly colored columbine provides the film's introduction to the garden.

The film's principal alternative to the hospital's bland, institutional tans, light greys and off-whites, its hard, sterile surfaces, its humming, whining machinery, its pale green computer screens, and its constricted spaces is the garden's greenery and brightly colored flowers, its large pots and boxes filled with dark brown earth, its sturdy and wispy, branching and climbing plants, its rough, uneven floor and brick and concrete walls that enclose it but still allow glimpses of the sky, its ambient, hushed hum-of-the-city and occasional bird songs (inserted in the sound track during post-production—as, in fact, are all the sounds in the garden sequences), and its openness to sunshine, rain, snow, wind, and the changing light. And, as we shall see, the garden provides Friedrich with the opportunity to move between what Sontag would call "truthful" and "metaphorical" ways of dealing with issues of sickness and health.

In subtle—almost subliminal—ways, the contrast between hospital and garden also results from Friedrich's use of video for the hospital footage and 16mm film for the garden footage.[13] [open endnotes in new window] Friedrich has said that in comparison to film, video "simply doesn't look good enough"[14] For *The Odds of Recovery*, however, she had no choice but to use a small video camera for clandestine filming in hospitals and doctors' offices, and, like the "weird framing" produced by the improvised set-ups for the video camera, the comparatively low resolution of the video image works to the film's advantage—precisely because it does not "look good enough." It cannot equal film's rich, fully saturated color and clarity of minute details of shapes, contours, and textures. Taking advantage of this difference in the two media, Friedrich makes her garden footage look more pleasurable—one might even say more therapeutic—than her hospital footage. (Presumably this is why Friedrich also used a video camera to film herself in a mirror before and after the breast biopsy.)

A selection of the garden's flowers. The close-ups not only emphasize the flowers' colors and textures but lend them a kind of "individuality" and importance in their own right.

Friedrich moving a large pot containing a dead plant. The brown plant in the foreground and the green plant behind Friedrich typify the garden's conjunction of life and death.

Our first glimpse of the garden comes after a little more than five minutes of the film—and two operations—have passed. A pinkish-violet and light yellow columbine blossom trembles in the wind as a voice-over describes the structure and function of the pituitary gland, most notably, its production of prolactin. The voice-over continues during the following sequence of shots: an extreme close-up of Friedrich's needle and thread embroidering the shape of a pituitary gland, a shot of Friedrich sitting on a sofa working on her embroidery under the warm light of a floor lamp, several extreme close-ups of her prolactin test report, and more close-ups of columbine blossoms swaying in the wind. Then, as we see Friedrich sitting on an examining table, visible only from shoulders to thighs, we hear her describing the history of her prolactin problem to her doctor, whose presence is signaled only by her minimal, off-screen responses: "yeah," "um," "uh-huh," "uh-huh," "right," and "wow," when she learns that Friedrich's prolactin level in 1989 was 300. While their exchange continues on the sound track, Friedrich cuts to a hand-held shot moving over a leafy green plant with lavender-colored flowers and up to several columbine blossoms. She then cuts back to the shot of her meeting with her doctor before returning to the garden for one more close-up of the columbine.

From this point on, the garden plays an increasingly prominent role in the film's complex montage of image, sound, and text. At different moments it may serve as visual counterpoint to the accompanying sound, or as a visual reference for narrative information provided by intertitles, or as a source of images that are

The garden offers a rich variety of colors and textures.

visually expressive in their own right, or as all three at once. It is also a place where Friedrich can move freely at her own pace: tending to plants or simply relaxing to read, sip coffee, or smoke a cigarette. The garden figures, as well, in Friedrich's efforts to come to terms with the difficulties in her relationship with her partner.

"We'd often have coffee under the honeysuckle," she says in an intertitle between shots of flowers in the garden while birds sing on the soundtrack. "And sometimes we'd talk about 'the sex thing,'" she continues in the next intertitle. Then, projecting her anxieties on the honeysuckle, she adds, "To distract myself from the panic, I'd stare at the plant, looking for dead tips to prune"—as if pruning them might eliminate the problems with "the sex thing." Though it does not resolve the problems, it at least offers some solace. This is one of the ways the garden comes to represent a therapeutic space that counters the hospital's institutional impersonality.

A different kind of therapy is suggested by the presence in the garden of two small sculptures: a Buddha in the iconic lotus position and a nude female torso. Though neither is alluded to in voice-over or inter-title, both bring to the garden autobiographical and more broadly cultural allusions.

The nude female torso: a totemic presence in the garden.

The Buddha signifies the concentrated serenity offered by the garden and gardening.

The Buddha figure links with t'ai chi and Chinese herbal tea, both of which figure in the regimen to bring down Friedrich's prolactin count. And more generally, the Buddha contributes to the garden a sense of serenity that is totally absent from the hospital environment and the narrative of Friedrich's long succession of operations. The female torso, classical in form but clearly modern in execution, might be thought of as the Garden Goddess, protectress of plants and those who care for them in their rooftop garden in Brooklyn. But it also alludes to the film's concerns with female sexuality and bonding–and, with quiet irony, to the unclassical, autobiographical body the filmmaker, who has allowed us to see *her* torso in varying degrees of unflattering reality. At the same time it signifies the possibility and promise of a healthy body.

While the garden offers a welcome alternative to the hospital, it is not totally isolated from the kingdom of the sick. At different times, it contains two souvenirs of Friedrich's last operation: her mammograms, which Friedrich pins on the garden's clothesline like a row of small hand towels hung out to dry, and a t-shirt stained from bleeding following the biopsy. It hangs on the clothesline from fall to the following spring. "I don't know why I couldn't take it down," Friedrich says in an intertitle.

Friedrich hangs her mammograms on the clothesline in the garden.

A subsequent sequence of images and intertitles hints at the reason for her reluctance to take it down:

- image: the t-shirt hanging on the clothesline
- intertitle: "Until I started trying to be healthy…"
- image: Friedrich taking the t-shirt off the clothesline
- intertitle: "I didn't realize how invested I was in being sick."
- image: Friedrich walking away from the clothesline
- intertitle: "It's when you're sick that you get love and attention, right?"

The blood-stained t-shirt not only represents a metonymic link to the physical trauma of the biopsy, but also serves as a metaphoric expression of Friedrich's investment in being sick in order to gain "love and attention." Taking down the t-shirt can be seen as a gesture of emancipation from both the physical and psychological regimes of ill health. Significantly, the t-shirt comes down in the spring when the garden is returning to life, as indicated by shots of daffodil buds about to open and Friedrich re-potting a plant. By contrast, the shot of Friedrich hanging the t-shirt on the clothesline in the fall is followed by a shot of wilted and dead flowers signifying not only the end of the growing season but also Friedrich's continued investment—at that point—in being sick.

Wilma the turtle who spent several years in the garden.

Enhancing the sense of the garden as a site of life and death are mini-narratives about to animals, Willa the turtle and Alma the cat. Willa was found in the street and installed in the garden, where she lived among the plants during the summer and spent the winter in a plastic box. But after several years Friedrich and her partner decided to return Willa to her natural habitat. "She didn't like those winters in a plastic box," Friedrich explains in an intertitle. After Willa is released at the edge of a lake along with a male turtle, Friedrich bids her farewell with the intertitle, "Happy trails, Willa." There is no happy ending, however, to Alma's story, which is told in a compact vignette of intertitles and images:

intertitle: "One of our roommates had a white cat named Alma."
image: close-up of white roses
intertitle: "At the age of 13, Alma died of cancer."
image: white petals scattered beneath the rose bush
intertitle: "We planted a white rose in her memory."
image: snow falling in the garden
image: close-up of snow on the stem of a rose plant
intertitle: "After a tough winter the rose died."
image: close-up of gloved hands with clippers cutting off dead rose stems

Some of the images accompanying the narrative about the death of Alma the cat.

Friedrich relaxing in the doorway to the garden.

Familiar to all gardeners, the practical task of cutting down dead plants not only provides a down-to-earth, unsentimental conclusion to Friedrich's cinematic memorial—in images of white roses and white snow—for a white cat, but also serves her larger purpose of investing the garden imagery with both literal and metaphorical relevance to the film's dialectics of sickness and health, life and death.

While gardening includes its own kinds of surgery, it also supplies metaphors for the surgical procedures inflicted on the body of the gardener. For example, in the sequences immediately following the vignette about Alma the cat, a voice-over description of the uterus accompanies shots of Friedrich working on her embroidered version of the uterus and shots of her pulling down vines in the garden. An intertitle announcing the discovery of her uterine polyps is followed by a powerfully suggestive montage: a shot of Friedrich cutting down a leafy vine with a loud *schunk*! as the cutter's blades sever a heavy cord supporting the vine, an intertitle, "The polyps had to come out," and a shot of the vine lying on the ground. Then, as we hear Friedrich reading the hospital's report of the operation, we see her gathering up the remains of the vine.

Nevertheless, the overriding impression produced by the garden is one of growth, health, and vitality, the product of a balanced relationship between nature and

Friedrich reading in the garden.

nurture. One significant example of that relationship appears close to the end of the film, when Friedrich provides step-by-step instructions on how to plant a tomato plant seedling. Each step is described in an intertitle and illustrated by a shot of Friedrich carrying out the intertitle's instruction. While seemingly simple and straight-forward, the sequence can also be read as a parable about laying the groundwork (so to speak) for a healthy body. "Start with good soil," reads the first intertitle, followed by instructions to add vermiculite, peat moss, and manure to the soil, and mix them well. The instructions continue with advice to "choose the healthiest seedlings for transplanting," and after planting them, water them well. "Then stand back and watch them grow." But nature cannot do the whole job. Nurturing must continue. After a shot of some mature plants and flowers, Friedrich adds one more intertitle: "But don't forget to keep feeding and watering them." That is the film's last intertitle, and it recalls three earlier intertitles listing essentials for "taking care of your health": "Exercise!" "Diet!" "Vitamins and minerals!" Friedrich's body requires as much nurturing as the garden's plants, a lesson we watch her learning in the course of the film.

Vines

As she puts that lesson into practice, Friedrich reasserts the agency she surrendered to the medical establishment and her own investment in being sick. The garden provides her with a metaphor for exerting personal agency: the tenacious morning glory vines growing where and how they will. One memorable, and amusing, shot is of a morning glory vine that has wrapped itself around the handle of a nearby broom. In another shot, Friedrich is engaged in disentangling a vine from several neighboring plants.

A tenacious vine in the garden.

Friedrich disentangling a vine from another plant.

The morning glory's tenacity is also emphasized by several shots in which the camera tilts up to reveal vines growing high up a wall. In one shot, the camera follows a single vine up a long cord attached to a wall while in ironic synchronization, the electronic whine of the bone density scanner accompanies the camera's movement.
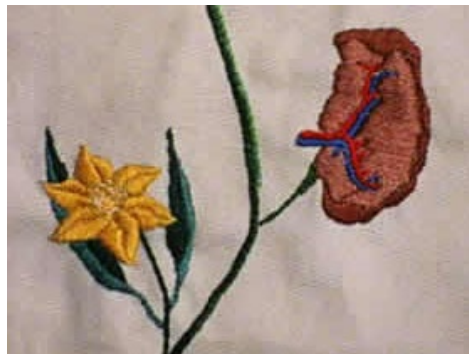
During the final credits sequence the camera travels "up" the embroidered vine from beginning to end. The completed film coincides with the completed vine, signifying a closure that is both aesthetic and autobiographical.

With subtler irony Friedrich turns the history of her operations and prolactin problem into the embroidered vine that "grows" as that history unfolds on the screen. Her depiction of damaged or diseased parts of her body as metaphorical "flowers" ("they are *not* 'flowers,'" Sontag would insist), is counter-balanced by our recognition that, in her embroidered image of flowering and growth, Friedrich implies a resolution to the conflict between the trauma of surgical operations and the reassuring continuity of recovery from those operations. The embroidered vine, like the film itself, translates the vicissitudes of Friedrich's ill health and the disorderly growth of the garden's vines into the orderly structures of art. Appropriately, the embroidered vine provides the imagery for a long credit sequence at the end of the film. As the camera moves "up" the vine from the first to the last operation and to one last flower and the tip of the vine, Friedrich intercuts the credits and brief moments of black accompanied by jaunty, slightly funky music and snippets of sound from earlier in the film.[15] This final sequence serves as a reminder that the whole film can be thought of as a vine of images, voices, text, and sounds meticulously stitched together by the filmmaker, who was forced to surrender agency to the demands of an unhealthy body and the structures and practices of the medical establishment. She reasserts her agency by drawing upon half a lifetime of recurrent ill health to make a film that truthfully *and* metaphorically illustrates the dilemmas of dual citizenship in the adjacent kingdoms of the sick and the well.

Go to Notes page

Notes

1. Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and its Metaphors* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989), 3. [return to page 1 of essay]

2. *The Odds of Recovery* is available on 16mm film from Canyon Cinema (www.canyoncinema.com), and on DVD from Outcast Films (www.outcast-films.com).

3. Janet Cutler, "Su Friedrich: Breaking the Rules," in *Women's Experimental Cinema: Critical Frameworks*, ed. Robin Blaetz (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 312.

4. The quoted phrase is from a description of the film at www.outcastfilms.com/films/ su/volume5.html.

5. Michael Renov, "The Subject in History: The New Autobiography in Film and Video," *Afterimage* 17.1 (1989): 5.

6. Susanna Egan," Encounters in Camera: Autobiography as Interaction," *Modern Fiction Studies* 40.3 (1994): 593.

7. Jim Lane, *The Autobiographical Documentary in America* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), 22.

8. For a discussion of Friedrich's "third person autobiography" in her film *Sink or Swim* (1990) see William C. Wees, "No More Giants," in Jean Petrolle and Virginia Wright Wexman, eds., *Women and Experimental Filmmaking* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 32-38.

9. Nadja Gernalzick, "To Act or to Perform: Distinguishing Filmic Autobiography," *Biography* 29.1 (2006): 3.

10. Friedrich may be referencing the early artist's video by Lisa Steele, *Birthday Suit with Scars and Defects* (1974), but in Steele's case the scars are not the result of surgery but of her clumsiness: "I have always been clumsy, tripping, dropping, falling with alarming regularity." (www.steeleandtomczak.com/birthday suit with scars and defects.html) [return to page 2]

11. Su Friedrich, personal communication.

12 Her only explicit acknowledgment of the system's contribution to keeping her odds of recovery very good appears in the closing credits: "Many thanks to

all the nurses, medical technicians, doctors, surgeons, therapists and alternative medicine practitioners who have treated me over the years."

13. While Friedrich shot most of the garden footage, some images of Friedrich in the garden were shot by Joel Schlemowitz (Friedrich, personal communication). [return to page 3]

14. Shari Kizirian, "Local Spotlight: Su Friedrich's New Film Premieres at MadCat," *Release Print: The Magazine of Film Art Foundation* (September 2002). Available at: www.sufriedrich.com/index.php.

15. The film begins in darkness with "hospital sounds" and ends in darkness with the chirping of a bird—one of Friedrich's subtler formal devices for integrating structure and meaning.

New media and politics: populist revolt, state control, and elections

review by Lyell Davies

Tweets From Tahrir editors Idle and Nunns argue that social media such as Twitter, "helped shape the form of the uprising" (19).

Tweets From Tahrir: Egypt's Revolution as it Unfolded, in the Words of the People who Made it. Edited by Nadia Idle and Alex Nunns. With a foreword by Ahdaf Soueif. New York: OR Books. 2011. 234 pages.

The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom. Evgeny Morozov. New York: Public Affairs. 2011. 432 pages.

iPolitics: Citizens, Elections, and Governing in the New Media Era. Edited by Richard L. Fox and Jennifer M. Ramos. Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, Sao Paulo, Dehli, Tokyo, Mexico City: Cambridge University Press, 2011. 322 pages.

As is illustrated by the recent books—*Tweets From Tahrir: Egypt's Revolution as it Unfolded, in the Words of the People Who Made it*; *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom*; and *iPolitics: Citizens, Elections, and Governing in the New Media Era*—there is an intense current interest in exploring how new media is intersecting with political life. Each of these titles is significantly different in content and research methodology. Nadia Idle and Alex Nunn's *Tweets From Tahrir* is a euphoric portrait of social media use during the Egyptian Revolution of 2011. Evgeny Morozov's *The Net Delusion* offers a dystopian study of the threat digital media poses to democracy. And Richard L. Fox and Jennifer M. Ramos' collection *iPolitics* is a political science study of media and electoral politics. Each is useful to our task of understanding new media's influence on political processes and conditions.

An image of protestors in Tahrir Square, posted to Yahoo's photo sharing site Flickr and numerous other online sites. Using digital tools and social media, protestors in Tahrir Square were able to document and share the Egyptian Revolution as it unfolded moment-by-moment.

In the pocket-sized *Tweets From Tahrir*, editors Idle and Nunn present a sampling of the "tweets" sent by Egyptian protestors between January 14 (the day dictator Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia was ousted) and February 14, 2011 (immediately after power was wrested from Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak). Presented in chronological order without spelling correction or vetting for accuracy, these 140-characters-or-less communiqués present a narrative of the Egyptian Revolution as it was lived by and shared among protestors. Idle and Nunn propose that these tweets serve as both,

> "firsthand, real-time accounts of events (a primary source for historians of the Egyptian Revolution); and as a testimony to the significant role that Twitter and other social media played in those events" (14).

The tweets in the book were all transmitted by individuals who were on the scene in Cairo before and during the Tahrir occupation. In a message sent shortly before the first mass protest on January 25, a Twitter subscriber with the username "monasosh" tweets, "Scared, excited and hopeful #Jan25" (29). The

But Idle and Nunns dismiss the Western media's labeling of the Egyptian Revolution as a "Twitter Revolution," arguing that this label "excuses commentators from seeking to understand the deep-seated causes of the uprising" (22). Purporting to prove the importance of social media in the Egyptian Revolution, images of one work of graffiti in Tahrir Square, featuring the words "Twitter" and "Facebook," received wide circulation in the Western media. This image is from "Quotes of the Day." Time World. February 2, 2011.

next day, user "Adamakaray" tweets, "#jan25 protestor's demands: increase minimum wage, dismissal of interior ministry, removal of emergency law, shorten presidential term" (33). In the pages that follow, using hundreds of tweets from dozens of Egyptian Twitter-users, the collection freezes in time the hopes and fears of a people who are in the midst of revolution. The 18-day narrative of tweets is broken only by a double-spread of ominous, wordless black pages, signifying the Egyptian government's temporary shut down of the Internet.

Idle and Nunns are measured in their remarks on the role social media played during the uprising. They dismiss the Western media's labeling of the revolution as a "Twitter Revolution", arguing that this label,

> "excuses commentators from seeking to understand the deep-seated causes of the uprising—the brutal economic reality for the majority of the population, the imposition of neoliberal policies reducing job security and suppressing wages, the lack of opportunities for educated young people, the sheer vindictiveness of a Western backed dictator as expressed through his police gangs" (22).

Nonetheless, they are convinced that although social media did not parent the revolution, these digital tools "helped shape the form of the uprising" (19). Critical of commentators who have ignored the role of social media in the Egyptian Revolution, Idle and Nunn argue that every revolution is "shaped in part by the technology available to those who make it and those who try to stop it" (21).

As a reader, I found *Tweets From Tahrir* most compelling as micro-level documentation of life inside the uprising. Campaigns, revolutions, or social movements, succeed or fail for a host of reasons and, as recent developments in Egypt have shown, effective long-term strategies are certainly essential to the long-term success of any movement for change. But so too is an ability to build immediate local solidarity among movement participants by creating a shared sense of purpose in and self-identification with the struggle. The messages presented in Idle and Nunn's book ably illustrate that tweets can be used to share big strategic or tactical matters, or to send or receive important news updates, but this is clearly not their only use. For the protestors in Tahrir, tweets seem to have also served as part of a moment-by-moment preening process, one that kept the protestors motivated, linked to, and working with each other.

3arabawy Hossam عمرو حسام
Police has started attacking the downtown Cairo occupation.
Reports of tear gas fired and arrests. Protesters chased to
side roads. #Jan25
00:47:41 Jan 26

Sarahngb Sarahngb
Panic struck in tahrir square. Several ambulance cars #jan25
01:11:49 Jan 26

monasosh monasosh
We need doctors to head to hisham mobarak, 3 badly injured
and we need help #jan25
01:18:25 Jan 26

Illustrating this process in operation, in a tweet from January 26 user
"Sandmonkey" offers advice to protestors who are expecting a quick end to their
struggle; he tweets, "Please remember, it took a month of protests 4 Tunis
revolution 2 success. Persistence is everything #Jan25" (48). In another
illustration, this time from early February, "ashrafkhalil" expresses pride in the
uprising when he tweets, "#egypt when did tahrir security guys get laminated
badges on lanyards? Just noticed that. These guys are ORGANIZED!" (181). And,
in a message that seems to illustrate the sender's growing self-identification with
the movement, "NevineZaki" tweets, "I never used 2 leave home without lip balm
in my bag. now it's switched to ID, tear gas mask & trash bags in a satchel! #fun
#Egypt #Jan25" (148).

3arabawy Hossam عمرو حسام
So in sectarian country like Egypt, how many churches have
been attacked since the uprising started? ZERO! Revolution
changes people. #Jan25
22:36:06 Feb 3

sharifkouddous Sharif Kouddous
Hundreds of people are sleeping next to each other in the
grassy area in the middle of the square. Packed together
close. #Egypt
22:46:56 Feb 3

sharifkouddous Sharif Kouddous
People have routed power from the street lights and are
charging their cell phones in Tahrir #Egypt
23:04:00 Feb 3

The role low level tweets such as these played in binding individual protestors to
each other as well as to the larger mass movement in Tahrir is not theorized by
the editors. But the constant authoring and exchange of hundreds of messages of
this ilk suggests that tweeting played a role in the emergence and articulation of
the political identities and allegiances of the protestors, as well as helping to
sustain their involvement over the duration of the struggle.

suzeeinthecity su zee
My dad hugged me after the news and said 'Ur generation did what ours could only dream of. i'm sorry we didn't try hard enough.' #egypt
01:52:17 Feb 12

monasosh monasosh
Tomorrow 10am, we all go and help in cleaning tahrir square. Bring garbage bags, gloves and join us #Jan25
02:11:25 Feb 12

For all people who are serious about exploring the intersection of digital media and political life, Morozov's *The Net Delusion* is essential reading. Polemical in style and contentious in its content, Morozov's work stresses how oppressive governments and demagogic propagandists are benefiting from the use of digital media communication technologies *at least as much* as democracy-minded citizen journalists. The author frames his argument with an account of the West's Cold War victory over the Soviet Union. He argues, Western leaders have erroneously accepted the theory that the Communist Bloc was defeated when populations living under Soviet rule were able to access Western radio and television broadcasts, or watch pro-Western videos on their home video cassette recorders. Today, he argues, this flawed theory has found new life in "The Google Doctrine"—a "cyber-utopian" belief that the unrestricted movement of information through new media technologies will prove "lethal to the most repressive of regimes" (xii). Supporting his argument with a range of briefly visited examples—such as China's highly restrictive Internet policies, the maintenance of state power in Russia during and since Soviet rule, and the use of social media during Iran's Green Revolution, Morozov argues that in many contexts the introduction of new media has not advanced freedom or justice. Instead, it has simply empowered the strong and disempowered the weak (xvii).

The Net Delusion is rife with eloquent propositions regarding the operation of new media. Writing on what he terms "digital orientalism," Morozov notes that in the West we tend to bemoan how the distraction of mass media entertainment is making "us" stupid but laud that these same digital medias are, when introduced into other regions, a force for democracy (241). In truth, he postulates, "The same young people America wants to liberate with information are probably better informed about U.S. popular culture than many Americans" (69).

But Morozov's study is strongest when he turns his attention to the ways repressive states can use digital technology to advance their own agendas. Here, he catalogues state surveillance, propaganda, and censorship use of these technologies. In a chapter titled, "Why the KGB wants you to join Facebook," he argues that digital technologies have enhanced the ability of governments to spy on their citizens. He contends,

> "Digital surveillance is much cheaper: Storage space is infinite, equipment retails for next to nothing, and digital technology allows doing more with less... there is no need to read every single word of an email to identify its most interesting parts; one can simply search for certain keywords... and only focus on particular segments of the conversation" (151).

Elsewhere, addressing how states can use new media for censorship purposes, he reminds us that the number-crunching algorithms that personalize our online shopping experience can just as easily be used to control what political information we have access to. Thus, the only difference between personalized advertising and personalized censorship is, "that one system learns everything about us to show us more relevant advertisements, while the other one learns everything about us to ban us from accessing relevant pages" (97). Morozov

From "In Just 5 Years, Twitter Changed World," posted by Eliot Spitzer. CNN. March 21, 2011.

Image from, "Does Facebook boost civic engagement among American youths, too?" by Stacy Teicher Khadoroo. Christian Science Monitor. February 24, 2011.

Image from "Updates on Day 10 of Egypt Protests," by newsblogger Robert Mackey. The New York TimesFebruary 3, 2011. This wider image reveals that between "Facebook" and "Twitter" the graffiti's author has also painted "Al Jazeera".

postulates,

> "One of the most interesting and overlooked features of today's globalized world is how much and how quickly authoritarian governments seem to learn from each other; any new innovations in Internet control by the most advanced are likely to trickle down to others" (139).

The author offers readers little respite from his dystopian view of digital media, except to say,

> "Fortunately, we are not alone on the Internet—at least one billion other users are also blogging, Googling, Facebooking, and Tweeting—and most of our information is simply lost in the endless ocean of digital ephemera produced by others" (163).

Rich in rhetorical flair, *The Net Delusion* is nonetheless a valuable counterpoint to the positivist views of new media that are today circulated in many popular, governmental, and academic arenas. Morozov's arguments are not without problems; some readers will lament that he does not provide more substantial case studies to illustrate his points—thereby bringing greater subtly and nuance to them; others will note that divergent conclusions can be drawn from some of the examples he does offer. Nonetheless, *The Net Delusion* directs us to an inventory of questions about how new media can be used to advance repressive political agendas, questions we must engage if we are to credibility assess the full impact of digital technologies on political life.

In contrast to Morozov's impassioned treatise, the chapters of Fox and Ramos' *iPolitics* provide a sober exploration of the intersection of new media, elections, and governance. In the introduction, the editors write, "the digital age has drastically transformed the method and style of political communication and mobilization" (2); then proposing,

> "Yet the degree to which the new media environment fundamentally alters political outcomes and brings citizens closer to democratic ideals… is much less clear" (2).

They offer two overarching questions to frame the studies presented in the collection: First, how have new media forms changed the way people and politicians engage in politics? And second, have these new media forms promoted democratic ideals around the world? (2) The combined findings delivered by *iPolitics* offer no simple answer to these questions, but they do provide clues as to some of the ways new media is impacting and restructuring political life while also directing us towards a latticework of additional questions about what may be occurring.

The book is organized in three sections, titled "The Shifting Media Universe and News Consumers," "Campaigns and Elections in the New Media Environment," and "Civic Mobilization and Governance in the New Information Age." The first two sections deliver a portrait of the expanded media environment of today (one where there are many more sources of information available to consumers, where news delivery is instantaneous and updated round-the-clock, and where there are a preponderance of niche markets and ideologically partisan news channels), as well as a study of the use of television and YouTube advertising by presidential hopefuls John McCain and Barack Obama and two studies of media use by

political campaigns in Northern Europe.

The character of the work in these first two sections is illustrated by, for instance, Zoe M. Oxley's study "More Sources, Better Informed Public? New Media and Political Knowledge." Here, the author reiterates the overall theme of the collection, asking,

> "has this explosion in the number and variety of outlets for political information resulted in a better informed public?" (26).

Examining the knowledge that audiences glean from a range of news media sources, including non-traditional ones such as fake news shows like *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, she determines,

> "increased news media options have not resulted in increased political knowledge levels among the overall public" (32).

In part, she proposes, this is because there has been an explosion in the range of entertainment media choices available to consumers too, thereby spreading audiences more thinly. Oxley concludes, although heavy news consumers can today access many more news information sources—and as a result tend to be better informed than they were in the past, among individuals who are not big news consumers the introduction of new media has not increased political knowledge (44).

There is no shortage of good scholarship in the first two sections of *iPolitics*, but it is not until its third and final section, titled "Civic Mobilization and Governance in the New Information Age," that the collection really finds its stride. In this section, in "The Dog That Didn't Bark: Obama, Netroot's Progressives, and Health Care Reform," Matthew R. Kerbel presents a fascinating study of the tensions between pro-Obama netroots progressives and the President's traditional Washington-insider supporters during the push for healthcare reform. Kerbel argues, netroots progressives believed that far reaching healthcare reform could be won if power could be wrested from an insider

> "system built around big-money television politics—including entrenched officials backed by wealthy interest groups, Washington-based political consultants, and old-fashioned journalists" (236).

However, the author explains, although Obama had embraced netroots progressives during his campaign for the presidency, once he was installed in the White House he turned instead to conventional power brokers for support, leading his administration to ignore the netroots on healthcare. Kerbel proposes, with the correct political will, netroots organizing can be harnessed by populist political campaigns as a means to circulate ideas, recruit support, and raise money, while offsetting the influence and interference of moneyed status-quo-minded Beltway-insiders.

In another well-targeted study from the third section titled "Twitter and Facebook: New Ways for Members of Congress to Send the Same Old Messages?" Jennifer L. Lawless delivers a simple but memorable examination of the digital communication behaviors of the members of the U.S. House of Representatives. For her research data, over an eight-week period Lawless monitored 7,043 Facebook updates and 7,668 Twitter messages issued by members of the House and Senate. From these she concluded that, in content, the digital messaging generated by today's elected officials is little different from the messaging of their pre-digital predecessors. Linking her findings to a study-framework developed by David Mayhew for his 1970s research on political messaging by politicians, Lawless notes that, today "the representatives and senators who use Twitter and Facebook tend to engage in the classic incumbent activities of advertising, position-taking, and credit-claiming" (228). Thus, although social media could

provide opportunities for greater interactivity between elected officials and the citizenry, thereby elevating political debate and deliberation, these tools are instead being used as "two new ways to send the same old messages" (209).

While Lawless's findings about the content of politician's digital messages is perhaps not surprising, her findings regarding who among the Congress is using new media technology is fascinating. She indicates that the average Republican Party representative sends nearly four times as many tweets than the average Democratic Party representative, as well as posts nearly three times as many Facebook updates (217). She contends, this may be because "Republicans distrust the mainstream media in far greater proportions than do Democrats" (216), and are therefore more committed than their colleagues from across the aisle, to finding ways to circumnavigate mainstream media gatekeepers when it comes to getting their message to the citizenry. Paradoxically, Lawless notes that despite egregious examples of overt sexism in media coverage of female candidates running during the 2008 election, women politicians are slightly less likely to use these communication tools than men, and are therefore not taking advantage "of these new media to sidestep the gendered media coverage they often receive" (217).

Also worth noting from the third section is Matthew A. Baum's "Preaching to the Choir or Converting the Flock: Presidential Communication Strategies in the Age of Three Medias," a study of the different messaging styles politicians will need to master if they are to communicate effectively with audiences through broadcast television news, Internet, and entertainment-driven soft news, program formats. Although Baum's article is not intended as a "how-to" piece, for *Jump Cut* readers who are active in political work, his study contains useful insight as to how to go about developing an effective media communications strategy for a political campaign.

Together, the ten chapters featured in *iPolitics* present a useful look into some of the ways new media is intersecting with electoral politics and matters of governance. Readers who are already fairly well versed in this subject area may be disappointed by some of the book's early chapters, insofar that they survey topics and themes that are already quite well known within the field. The collection is also a little unbalanced geographically: the three non-America based studies are not comprehensive enough in their scope for the editors to claim that the collection is global in its focus; therefore, with the rest of the collection targeting U.S. politics and media, some of the space used by these studies could have been better allocated for additional America-focused studies.

Aristotle argued that rhetoric impacts all other disciplines of learning and praxis, since oral communication is a requirement in all fields of human endeavor. Today, digital communication occupies a similar position and the influence of new media is being felt in every social and cultural arena, including political life. Although each employs a different epistemological approach, *Tweets From Tahrir, The Net Delusion*, and *iPolitics* each deliver insight as to how new media is influencing political conditions and our engagement with political processes. Whether or not we're satisfied with the political realities new media is now playing some role in orchestrating is for us to decide.

Menken at work: the artist introduces her hand in *Go!Go!Go!*

A machinic viewpoint emerges: stop-motion reveals the repetitive patterns of the Alhambra in *Arabesque for Kenneth Anger*.

Work-in-progress: Marie Menken and the mechanical representation of labor

by Caroline Guo

"I just liked the twitters of the machine"—such was Marie Menken's explanation of her draw towards filmmaking.[1] [open notes in new window] And thus it follows, upon discovering the kinetic potentials of the medium, so began her transition from paint to film, celebrating cinema's capacities to observe, capture, and impose movement. Menken's concerns with motion both within the frame and with regard to her own camera movement have since been likened to

- poetic fluidity and freedom by Stan Brakhage;[2]
- spontaneous, tender expressionism according to Scott MacDonald;[3] and
- somatic lyricism in the words of P. Adams Sitney.[4]

However, while her films undoubtedly display a free-swinging and free-flowing visual melody, I also see a certain staccato punching the tune—a pronounced, machinic viewpoint cast onto her surroundings, denaturalizing the environment through her frequent use of stop-motion. Consequently, I come back to Menken's original, seemingly innocent statement to rethink her work along the line of these "twitters," this "machine," and the implications of this statement—or the mechanics behind the camera as an apparatus and filmmaking as a practice.

That is to say, through her films' kineticism, Menken goes beyond just exercising a certain freedom of expression to reveal and revel in a mechanical reworking of her surroundings. Melissa Ragona also recognizes the comparison of Menken's work to poetry as potentially reductive, instead examining Menken's manipulation of the medium in relation to a larger exploration of film form and aesthetics.[5] Yet, going past the aesthetic surface of the images, this manipulation proves striking not only for its visual dimensions but also because Menken makes no attempts to hide this degree of reworking. In other words, she makes no attempt to render illusory the amount of work put into her camera(work). For instance, both at the beginning and

Menken's camera transforms the Manhattan inhabitants into strangely gliding ghosts.

Going beyond natural optics, the mechanical backbone of our surroundings is exposed.

Viewing the world at full speed as the handheld camera journeys into the city.

end of *Go!Go!Go!* (1962-1964), which she called her "major work" and the focus of this essay, she waves her arm in front of the camera and in the mirror. In between, she releases an onslaught of frenetic images of the city of Manhattan and its inhabitants, transforming them into robots, ghosts—anything but simply human. Thus, nothing appears to come naturally—not the manner in which these metropolitan individuals carry on their routines, and certainly not the creation of these images themselves, made possible only through the exertion of her own hand in the process.

As a result, I argue that Menken's use of the mechanical capacities of film actually serves to reveal the underlying—or overarching, rather—fabric of labor necessary in carrying out daily life and artistic creation, which is a structure that, in the words of Walter Benjamin, normally lies "beyond natural optics."[6] Effectively, the techniques employed in her work venture beyond the limits of natural perception in order to render visible the normally intangible, oft-concealed details and systems that make up our surroundings—in particular, the universality of labor in defining the material world and human condition. Thus, her handling of the camera and film medium can be viewed in relationship to Benjamin's 1936 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." According to Benjamin, film, as a medium based in mechanical reproduction, is capable of uncovering the invisible structures and processes of mechanical reproduction that lie at the heart of modern society. In Menken's case, though, it is less of a reproduction of the sights around her, but a representation. Through her handheld camera, she ultimately offers a vision of the world that brings forth a meditation on not only the mechanical form of film, but also the mechanical form of being—an exposure of the backbone of labor that proves an intrinsic part of modern existence as well as her own art, or work, of filmmaking.

In transit

A journey across the Brooklyn Bridge, taken aboard a moving vehicle: up goes Menken's camera, catching a glimpse of the cables dividing the sky above; out to the side it turns, looking at the buildings lining the cityscape. Immediately following her waving hand in *Go!Go!Go!,* these shots announce the imminent arrival into Manhattan. And yet, this is anything but a typical day trip: the excursion is an accelerated one, viewed through the window of the vehicle in motion and the rapid speed of the stop-motion film. Thus, from the very beginning, Menken conveys a mechanically manipulated manner of perceiving the city and, eventually, its inhabitants.

Concerning the potential behind such a moving, vehicular viewpoint, Ralph Waldo Emerson exclaims in his essay "Nature":

New thoughts emerge from aboard a speeding train.

Through fast motion, the expanse of Warhol's (art)work comes into view.

The Menken (super) express reveals the repetitive nature of Warhol's mechanically reproduced Jackies.

"Certain mechanical changes, a small alteration in our local position apprizes us of a dualism […] What new thoughts are suggested by seeing a face of country quite familiar, in the rapid movement of the rail-road car!"[7]

Trees could be rendered as lines; hills as paintstrokes—the world, when viewed through the screen of the train window and motion of the locomotive, begins to take on previously unseen dimensions. Indicating the significance of such a perspective, Menken inserts a second shot later in the film also taken aboard a moving vehicle, and this time clearly on a train. Offering a blurred view of the landscape, the particularity of this window seat lies in its ability to leave us with more of an impression—an idea—of the environment rather than a single clear image of it. Consequently, we have the opportunity not only to perceive our surroundings in different terms but also to rethink the structures of this world unfolding before us at full speed.

Of course, Emerson's exclamation came much earlier (in 1836), when such motion was a novelty. However, Menken also registers more than just a perspective taken through a moving locomotive. Her view is a fast-forwarded one—a motion on top of a motion, or a speeding up of a speeding up, lending itself to as ort of hyper-kineticism. That is, within a given amount of time, we are subjected to several times the amount of stimuli than we would be had the images been rendered in real-time. Likewise for her film *Andy Warhol* (1965), which uses the same process of single-frame photography, Menken described it as "[a] long day in the life of Pop artist Andy Warhol shortened into minutes."[8] Indeed, when faced with such a stream of images, we are able (and forced) to gather a larger sense of the filmed subject in a shorter amount of time—in a brief ride aboard the Menken (super) express, where movement, space, and time are all emphatically denaturalized.

In fact, such compression, intensification, and ultimate reanimation—reworking—of Manhattan through this stop-motion technique bring the place and its people to obey a new order of time and space that both condenses and reveals the overarching patterns of an entire day in just under twelve minutes. Menken's use of an overtly processed viewpoint and purposeful venturing outside the limits of natural perception come to divulge the usually imperceptible qualities of concrete phenomena, echoing Benjamin's description of the revolutionary aspects of film. Specifically, he declares:

"Then film came along and exploded all these dungeons with the dynamite of its tenths of a second, leaving us free, now, to undertake adventurous journeys […] And just as enlargement is not really concerned with simply clarifying what we glimpse 'anyway' but rather brings out wholly new structural formations in matter, neither does the slow-motion technique simply bring out familiar movement motifs but reveals in them others that are quite unfamiliar and that 'bear no resemblance to decelerations of rapid movements but are likely strangely gliding, floating, supernatural ones.'"[9]

While Menken uses the opposite of slow-motion, her fast-motion's revelatory potential reflects Benjamin's argument that such changes in

Lines and repetition make up the raw material for construction.

The human ant farm emerges from a bird's-eye view.

Reworking the surroundings: camera as bulldozer.

speed do not simply make the subject's already visible details more visible but actually expose what is usually illusory. As a matter of fact, acceleration is a process that can prove equally revealing. Although it renders minute differences and details indistinct, this erasure of individual faces and creation of smooth masses of "strangely gliding" bodies brings forth notions of uniformity as well as, in Ragona's words, "the aggressive serial repetition that Menken achieves through pixilation."[10] Effectively, such repetition is a running pattern throughout her works, produced by her manipulation of the medium. In *Arabesque for Kenneth Anger* (1961), Menken directs our gaze to and speeds up the view of the repeating lines structuring the Alhambra; in *Andy Warhol,* the artist's mass-produced Brillo boxes are seen in rapid succession, indistinguishable from one another. While this serial repetition is deliberately and mechanically achieved, Menken also brings to light that such a pattern is already part of the environment, its structures, and, most significantly, its people. Her stop-motion just renders it more perceptible.

Thus, repetition is there and perhaps everywhere: it just needs to be actively looked for and exposed. Moreover, it becomes evident that above all (or underneath it all), this serves as a principal structuring device of not only architecture and concrete objects, but also the implementation of human actions and specifically their work. Twice in *Go!Go!Go!* Menken films underway constructions sites, stationing herself at a distance. Now that these individuals who are busy laboring away have been rendered in miniature, rapidly moving form, repetition becomes the most discernible aspect of their movement as they resemble a human ant farm of sorts, scurrying forth with their seemingly pre-prescribed roles and endless amounts of tasks. By viewing the construction from such a perspective and pace, we can get the bigger picture of the amount of effort involved in transforming these sites as well as the impression of a uniform, laboring body maintaining the city.

At the same time, Menken often foregoes her distant window seat in order to throw herself directly into the crowds, caught amidst the flow of their repetitive currents. Instead of just observing the bustling bodies through a static camera and intervelometer-driven recording, which would provide a similarly sped-up view yet only a single perspective of such action, Menken's handheld camera and moving use of single-frame photography demonstrate both the mobility of her perspective as well as her own movement and involvement in this environment. Frequently in quite close proximity to these anonymous strangers, she is moving as they are moving, which appears to render the surrounding activity more accessible and, in a way tactile. That is to say, she is not only seeing this hyper-kinetic movement up close but also experiencing it firsthand—and in turn giving us as spectators a chance to experience this pace too.

In addition, Sitney claims,

> "By embedding her moments of transcendence within the rhythmic convulsions of city life, Menken declares her participation in the very ceremonies and engrossments she

Close-up on Warhol's hands through Menken's handheld camera: artist-worker meets artist-worker.

An unglamorous look at a day in the life of Warhol's Factory workers.

sees through."[11]

In other words, by placing herself in the middle of the city's movement, she is not only moving as they are moving but also working as they are working. She seems to acknowledge her own place alongside these individuals and consequently her own act of filming as being busy at work as well. Her participation also forces her filming into a more frenetic, unstable pace, demonstrating the extent to which she is both shaped by the surrounding movement and simultaneously striving to reshape this movement, caught in a constant give-and-take between filmmaker and city—worker and world. Just like the laborers, in order to attain her desired image of the city, she also has to work for it, reordering it bit by bit or frame by frame. In lieu of cranes and bulldozers, though, the handheld camera becomes the main (re)construction tool.

All in a day's work

Package, tape, repeat: in *Andy Warhol,* the beginning of the artist's workday is rendered in stop-motion, making these his main, discernible actions and reinforcing the relentless cycle he is engaged in. The visualization of his day as well as inclusion of fellow Factory workers is reminiscent of Menken's representation of the teams of construction workers in *Go!Go!Go!*, who are also involved in such regularity of action. Furthermore, when describing the making of this film, Menken stated how "some of the sequences took over an hour to shoot, and last perhaps a minute on the screen."[12] Thus, in order to achieve the smooth, accelerated effect, the unavoidable task of taking single images must come first. There is no short cut, only and always just work to be done.

Ultimately then, no matter the status—whether the celebrity Warhol or the unidentifiable laborers, and whether in front of or behind the camera—one common factor emerges: we all have to work. Matthew Tinkcom, in emphasizing the omniscience of this system, claims that

> "the capacity to labor on the material world is the modernist predication of every subject's social worth."[13]

Consequently, by going beyond the glamour of Warhol's star persona and completed products, Menken plunges into the construction sites that usually remain concealed from public view whilst exposing the structure of labor governing the artist's day-to-day circumstances. Here is where he gets his worth from—his immense capacities to continually carry out such labor form the real foundation of his success.

It becomes necessary here to point out a distinction between work and labor. Tinkcom describes labor as the continuous, repetitive process involved in carrying out daily life in the modern world, while work implies a more subjective act or an act that humans create for themselves.[14] At the same time, I find that this distinction reinforces the notion that labor and work are mostly inseparable, as it is often impossible to achieve this subjective act of work without the structure of labor as support. For instance, while we can consider the overall craft of filmmaking as work, the process needed to carry out this

Menken takes us to the real source of Warhol's value and the backstage construction at the Factory.

Up close and personal, Menken moves and works alongside the busy Manhattanites.

A look at Willard Maas busy at work, showing that no creativity comes without labor.

subjective act could very much be defined as labor due to its continuous, repetitive nature that potentially determine both the making-of and the artist's lifestyle. In *Go!Go!Go!* Menken films her husband, underground filmmaker and poet Willard Maas in front of his typewriter. Clutching his head in his hands, refilling the paper, standing up to contemplate, repeat—his creative frustration is displayed as largely laborious, and the placement of his scene in the middle of the film contains him within the daily grind instead of outside of it. Therefore, despite—or because of—these singular efforts to work as an artist, he is still inevitably engrained in the overall structure of labor that defines the running of the urban jungle.

Similar to the manner in which Maas is represented, *Warhol* also puts on display the labor behind the aesthetic surface and becomes a representation of Menken's offscreen presence. Ragona writes:

> "In making Andy Warhol, she also is making a 'copy' of her own aesthetic personality—one that had an affinity with Warhol's work ethic."[15]

As Warhol is occupied with packaging the boxes, Menken, too, is occupied, with the task of filming him in single frames—not only is artistic creation carried out on both ends of the camera, but also, plainly, work. In addition, with her handheld camera, she literally incorporates her body into the images, leaving behind traces of the physical labor required. Although her exertion cannot necessarily be equated to that put forth by the construction workers in the city, the bodily input and physical involvement in both cases suggests that Menken's task of reorganizing the environment at hand can be viewed as akin to the laborers' undertaking in reconfiguring a particular area. Both are, in fact, different means to achieve the same goal, which is demonstrating one's capacity to labor on the material world.

Go to page 2

The artist comes to resemble one of his mechanical reproductions.

The machine of daily life emerges in the (assembly) line of a graduation ceremony…

Labor becomes the ends as much as the mean. As Ragona suggests, Menken mainly demonstrated an "interest in the structural possibilities of art making, a decided focus on process over content."[16] [open notes in new window] It is the in-between rather than the A or B endpoint of any trajectory that takes precedence, as it is the stage that not only proves most prevalent but also comes to determine the motion of modern life. As Menken's filming of Manhattanites emphasizes their strangely gliding uniformity and repetition, the filming of Warhol also reflects this impression. He passes in front of his serial reproductions of Jackie Kennedy, rapidly moving forth and seemingly flattened in front of his work. As a result, the structural processes of his artistic production are what come to define him. He becomes a mechanically perpetuated image like his mechanically created images—a repetitive machine as much as his Factory and his creations are sites of mechanical reproduction. Even when Menken turns her attention in *Go!Go!Go!* to other happenings besides that of construction and creation, such as the rituals and ceremonies of graduation, debutante balls, and body-builder competitions, the machine-like manner of leading daily life also emerges. The black-robed graduates file in an orderly line to collect their diplomas, virtually clones of one another. The debutantes line up in their similarly-toned pastel dresses, facing away from the camera and basically unidentifiable. And the men in the muscle competition come up to the stage one by one, only to repeat the same gestures over and over again. Hence, although those involved in such rituals and ceremonies may strive towards affirming their uniqueness, the process of attaining such distinction is rendered almost entirely uniform, which in turn renders these individuals' identities almost entirely uniform as well.

As a result, one of the tensions of modern life appears to lie in the struggle between differentiating oneself yet acknowledging one's participation in the on-going machine of modern society. Menken uses the film medium to foreground this tension and it displays what Tinkcom describes as

> "cinema's capacity as the medium, par excellence, that visualizes—renders onto a visual register—the indeterminacies and contradictions of capital and the effects of modernity."[17] [open endnotes in new window]

Her exposure of the repetitive nature of individual activities as well as her own oscillation between detachment and involvement demonstrate this continuous conflict of distinguishing one's identity caught in the upkeep of the collective system. It's an inconclusive struggle that encapsulates our situation as mere humans aboard the moving train of society.

In effect, it is a vehicle and machine that has long been in motion, too late to stop. All we can and know to do is to keep the structures and processes going. Our surroundings can perhaps only be captured in medias res— already aboard a moving train, in flux, interminable, and a constant work-in-progress. After all, we begin our journey into the city on a vehicle that is already in motion. Also, when filming other views besides the city, Menken

... faceless, identity-less debutantes ...

... and uniformity at a body-building competition.

The quickened view of Ripley's meticulously potted plants in *glimpse of the Garden* offers an impression of the work that has gone into the garden.

is often concerned with the organization that has already been set in place, heightening our awareness of the pre-existence of this order as well as her own contribution to this reordering. In filming her late friend Dwight Ripley's garden in *Glimpse of the Garden* (1957), she puts on display that this is a nature that has already been worked over, long before she has come around to film it—the ubiquitous flower pots, pristine pond, and carefully-tended flowers. As MacDonald explains,

> "Ripley's garden reflects the organization and regular maintenance necessary for keeping a wide variety of plants alive."[18]

That is not to say that Menken is being critical of this structuring; on the contrary, she acknowledges that such construction can certainly be beautiful. But its maintenance is hardly natural. Simultaneously, through the speed, close-focus of her camera and added soundtrack of chirping birds, she is in the midst of reorganizing the space with her own hand, bringing forth the notion that work thus invites more work.

In the end is there anything left that has not already been reworked (and can only be, in a way, re-reworked), and does our contribution to the material world not just perpetuate the cyclical nature of such work? Even though the sunset at the end of *Go!Go!Go!* signals the end of the (work)day, instead of offering a sense of closure, Sitney describes how it in fact displays "the rhythms of human temporality that project into a repeating future,"[19] offering only a temporary intermission in the daily spectacle, implying that the show will continue again the next day, everyday. This endless cycle brings to light a certain absurdity that makes up an intrinsic part of modern existence. Despite the grandeur and seriousness of our efforts and clamors for carving out our own special places in the world—our own work, our own gardens—we are all ultimately just one out of many involved in the maintenance of not only our surroundings but also the overall structure of labor itself. As Menken declares that *Go!Go!Go!* aimed to put on display "the ridiculousness of [human] desires,"[20] this emphasis on and revelation of a certain ridiculousness implies that the world, or at least Menken's view of it, ultimately resembles a theater of the absurd. With humans taking on and bringing upon themselves the performance of labor, we become miniature figurines dotting a transitional stage on which we are just busy, busy, busy with no real finale in sight. The manner in which her camera brings forth such ideas echoes Benjamin's claim of cinema's capacities to enlighten:

> "[A]ccentuating hidden details of props with which we are familiar, exploring commonplace environments under the inspired guidance of the lens . . . film increases our understanding of the inevitabilities that govern our lives."[21]

Indeed, Manhattan still looks like Manhattan and the people still look like the people—just faster, stranger, more repetitive, ridiculous, and perhaps

Carving out her own garden, Menken visually reorganizes Ripley's work through close-up. Menken's camerawork guides us to realize the regular maintenance required for "natural" beauty.

Menken acknowledges Ripley's work before her.

The sun never sets on the modern city's stage.

hilarious. As Maas's procedure of writing comes to resemble a sort of self-inflicted suffering that takes on almost cartoonish proportions through Menken's sped-up view, we are then able not only to see but also to understand the likely (tragi)comedy at the heart of human existence. Ultimately, what keeps us so busy is, simply, ourselves.

Moreover, through the almost comical rendition of Maas's laboring, Menken seems to suggest that if we really must be part machine in order to get the job done, then the least we can do is let go of any pretenses of self-importance, maybe even poking fun at ourselves in the process. In effect, she largely displayed irreverence towards her own practice of filmmaking as a mythologizing or theorizing realm à la Brakhage and Deren, which, according to Sitney, has often hindered her from being considered an artiste par excellence.[22] However, by shedding pretensions of artistic illusion and vanity, she is equally engaging in a self-reflexive act concerning the capacities of film, exposing its ability to visualize the motion of the processes and mechanics that regulate both the creation of film and the running of the material world, as well as the fact that despite its seemingly independent existence as a mechanical entity, the camera still needs a human to use it—to work it. There is still forcibly a heartbeat behind the machine, a hand behind the apparatus, and, as a result personal, multi-faceted sensations behind the experience of work. It could be tiring, but it could also just as likely be enjoyable and, surprisingly, fun.

Labor of love

Ultimately, it would be too simplistic to deem Menken's portrayal of labor as just tedious, repetitive, and absurd. By filming a wide array of individuals at work, and by both detaching and involving herself alongside their routines, her film not only provides a larger impression of these structures but also a more multifarious experience. That is to say, not only can there be different modes of working but also different ways of experiencing work. As Menken once claimed: "All art should be fun in a sense."[23] Therefore, while the task of filming is often laborious, occupying those several hours that are then projected onscreen in just minutes, she declares that the practice and the resulting product also could be and actually should be a pleasurable experience. This offers the idea of a different sort of work at play that offers an escape from the numbing effects of standardization. Indeed, for Menken, filmmaking would have provided a respite from the demanding office shifts that occupied much of her time. Brakhage recounts:

> "[I]t was Marie who worked, bringing home the money. For all of their married life she worked for Time-Life; and every evening, five and sometimes six days a week, Marie trudged up to the Time-Life building for the night shift, to pick up all the overnight cables from whatever state or country she was handling that night, and held that job for thirty years. She would come home at two or three o'clock in the morning and drink herself into sleep."[24]

Thus, Menken's preoccupation with the repetitive, organized structures of modernity likely stems from the permanence of the act of work and process

The absurdly miniature figurines of Menken's world view.

Keeping himself busy ...

... Maas just can't stay still.

of labor that governed her own life. Subsequently her filmmaking is also reflective of a search for a different mode of work or a more self-gratifying way in which one could exert oneself towards reaching an outcome. In her diaristic work *Notebook* (1963), she makes raindrops fall from a tree branch faster than they normally would have fallen, revealing the brusque interference of her hand. She therefore not only exposes her impatience and physical effort but also a certain pleasure in being able to make nature run faster and breaking the onscreen illusion. In fact, this kind of engagement with work could be contemplated in terms of Tinkcom's description of "work-as-play," referring to the creation of products unattached to material, economic gains yet all the more personally satisfying because of its seeming inutility.[25] By putting on full display the workmanship involved in her craft and art as a whole and by waving her hand exuberantly in front of the camera, Menken is in fact celebrating her conscious effort to film for the sake of filming, to play with aspects such as light, exposure, aperture, and transport speed that are all part of this machine she carries around so willingly with her, and to continue doing all this for something other than (and bigger than) money.

Also, in conveying this willing performance of labor and the extent to which this task defines her work (her films), she is simultaneously meditating on her role as a filmmaker, artist, and voluntary worker. As Tinkcom states:

> "To be conscious of this labor as that which gives rise to consciousness itself makes each human a philosopher of his or her own conditions, but such a recognition also forces us to extend Marx's critique of our political and economic conditions for life to the spheres in which we exert ourselves for something besides money."[26]

Effectively, as part of the U.S. underground scene, her filmmaking was not what would be bringing in the cash. The night shifts were the requisite work(-for-money); the filmmaking was the conscious choice to work(-as-play). However, referring back to Tinkcom's aforementioned claim on labor being essentially tied to worth, there must be another value attributed to this latter form. And indeed Menken claimed that her main reason for creating her films was for "people I love, for it is to them I address myself."[27] Clearly then—or consciously, rather—her main motivation was an intangible, invaluable sensation removed from the constraints of economic measurement. The resulting sense of liberation that so often emerges from her films could therefore come from not only the energy of her camera movement but also the notion that this work provides us a glimpse of what work looks like when free—not from labor but from monetary-valued labor. Liberated yet structured; fun yet tedious: Menken emphasized these lasting incongruities with respect to her filmed subjects and her own position as a filmmaker. Lastly, with her initial, immediate attraction to the mechanics of the apparatus, she did not film only for her intended spectators, but also out of her awareness of and love for the components of the camera, taking pleasure in revealing, contemplating, and above all embracing her role as an active, experimental filmmaker by day—as well as by choice.

*****

Sadly, many of Menken's works have fallen into disrepair following a flood in her apartment, and she also rarely made definitive versions of her films.

Menken finds her double in the city, another woman at work and play behind the machine.

The work of experimental filmmaking becomes personal and dedicated to "people I love" (close acquaintances such as Kenneth Anger).

[28] As a result, her works often seem to display a rough, unfinished quality, implying that there could always be more work to be done. Not only is contemporary life viewed as a perpetual work-in-progress, but all of Menken's films could also be deemed as works-in-progress, caught in the middle of their course. Often choosing to leave in what would normally be seen as "mistakes" in her films, she also indicates that perfection is just a myth. There is never really any polished or definable beginning or end but just a middle or a never-ending sprawl emanating infinitely outwards that we have to work for. And yet herein lies a little slice of time and space that we can also work on, and where all the movement—all the toil and all the joy—emerges.

Moreover, it is this middle where camera meets environment, filmmaker meets subject, and individual meets world that Menken foregrounds in her constant balancing act between observation and imposition,[29] passenger and worker. Consequently, she exposes and celebrates the medium at its most exuberant, even its most fundamental, as a fruitful encounter between her camera and her subject—between the apparatus and the environment caught in a mutual process of reshaping. As such, a certain empowerment behind her portrayal of work emerges. Despite the minute nature of our existence, perhaps it is one of the main methods we have of carving out a place for ourselves in our surroundings—even if it is only for an instant before it is reorganized and rethought by someone else, by many others (again and again and again). And thus it follows, armed with her tools Menken becomes The Woman with a Movie Camera, heading into the city and the heart of her subjects whilst bringing both the banality and beauty of modern existence under the twitters of her cinematic machine.

Go to notes page

Until the next (work)day, Menken waves exuberantly to her audience.

Notes

1. P. Adams Sitney, *Eyes Upside Down: Visionary Filmmakers and the Heritage of Emerson* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 24. [return to page 1 of essay]

2. Stan Brakhage, *Film at Wit's End: Eight Avant-Garde Filmmakers* (New York: McPherson, 1991).

3. Scott MacDonald, "Avant-Gardens," in *Women & Experimental Filmmaking*, ed. Jean Petrolle and Virginia Wright Wexman (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 208-237.

4. Sitney, 21-47.

5. Melissa Ragona, "Swing and Sway: Marie Menken's Filmic Events" in *Women's Experimental Cinema: Critical Frameworks*, ed. Robin Blaetz (Durham: Duke of University Press, 2007), 20-41.

6. Walter Benjamin, translated by J.A. Underwood, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (London and New York: Penguin Books, 2008), 6.

7. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays and Lectures* (New York: Library of America, 1983), 33-34.

8. Ragona, 35.

9. Benjamin, 29.

10. Ragona, 36.

11. Sitney, 37.

12. Sitney, 36.

13. Matthew Tinkcom, *Working Like a Homosexual: Camp, Capital, Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2002), 6.

14. Tinkcom, 11. His definition is derived from Hannah Arendt's discussion of labor in *The Human Condition*.

15. Ragona, 36.

16. Ragona, 34. [return to page 2]

17. Tinkcom, 27.

18. MacDonald, 211.

19. Sitney, 35.

20. Sitney, 32.

21. Benjamin, 29.

22. Sitney, 27. Sitney notes Menken's playful self-evaluation in contrast to Deren, Brakhage, and Warhol while quoting Brakhage's *Film at Wit's End* where he describes Menken's lighthearted yet self-reflexive treatment of her own position.

23. Sitney, 24.

24. Brakhage, 46.

25. Tinkcom, 12-13.

26. Tinkcom, 24.

27. Sitney, 40.

28. Sitney, 25.

29. P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde 1943-2000* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 161.

The 1959 film, *The Cry of Jazz*, begins with the end of a meeting of the "Parkwood Jazz Club" as a racially mixed group of twenty somethings begin to leave a modest apartment. Chicagoans in 1959 would likely read this as a thinly veiled event in the University of Chicago's Hyde Park neighborhood, at the time the city's best known integrated neighborhood for young single professionals and students. Chicago was one of the most residentially segregated Northern cities at the time, actually more segregated than many in the South.

Natalie (left) thanks Bruce (center) for inviting her to the event, and for explaining that rock and roll is jazz. Hearing this Alex (right) comes over to correct Bruce, precipitating the argument for the rest of the film.

The Cry of Jazz and the expressive politics of music and race: interview with Ed Bland

by Chuck Kleinhans

About Bland's film *The Cry of Jazz* (1959)

Edward O. Bland directed the remarkable film, *The Cry of Jazz* (1959), a landmark work of African American independent filmmaking. A 34 minute-long exposition about the nature and status of jazz music and the situation of black Americans, the film uses dramatic dialogue, direct address argumentation, realist documentary illustration, an innovative music soundtrack, and essayistic construction to argue about the nature of U.S. jazz music as an expression of the situation of black Americans in the center of the Civil Rights era. Seeing jazz as both empowering and limiting, the film is an acute and even painful statement of its political, social, cultural, and artistic moment.

The film's frame starts with a post-meeting discussion at the "Parkwood Jazz Club" among a racially mixed group of members. When a young white guy offers the opinion that rock 'n' roll is jazz, he is schooled by several very articulate black fellows who give an elaborate explanation of both the formal musical qualities of jazz and an explanation of jazz as an African American cultural form. The film was controversial in its first screenings: denounced as "Negro chauvinism" and promoted as bearing a message whites needed to hear and understand. It was elected to the Library of Congress National Film Registry in 2010. The film experienced a new surge of interest following the revived reputation of musician Sun Ra whose group is seen and heard extensively illustrating the didactic points.

After making the film, Ed Bland has had a notable career in the commercial music industry as a recording executive. In his varied professional life he has also been a working performing musician, a composer of blues and rhythm and blues music, a music-track producer for educational films, an arranger and recording executive for dozens of notable music artists, a composer, arranger, and orchestrator for dramatic and documentary films, a jazz radio DJ, a concert

As Alex begins his exposition on what jazz is and how it is an expression of the conditions of Negro life in America, we see various scenes of urban ghetto life, such as these young boys throwing rocks at 40 oz. beer bottles on a burning pile of rubbish.

The soundtrack shifts back and forth from jazz being played to Alex's didactic explanation of the relation of jazz to black life. This sequence cleverly cross cuts the rhythmic nature of girls playing jump rope with teen boys playing basketball outdoors. Agile moves mark both everyday actions with the musical soundtrack providing rhythm to the bodies in motion.

impresario, and a teacher and mentor to young aspiring hip hop artists. He has also composed work in the field of "art music," that is, modern classical music.

I was astonished when I first saw the film in the 1970s, and I wanted to find out more about it and its director. That took a long time, but I finally had a chance to interview Ed Bland in Los Angeles, April 2, 1998. This interview represents that encounter, augmented with a few facts from other sources. [1][open endnotes in new window]

Nina Cartier, a Ph.D. student in Screen Cultures, Northwestern University, did the initial transcription of the interview (and a terrific job!). I have edited it into a more concise and readable format (standard procedure for interviews). And I promised Bland the opportunity to review the interview before publication for any corrections of fact.

Because new information has come to light, and several later interviews have been published, I've added some explanatory and additional information here in footnotes, hoping to make this as efficient for the reader and as accurate and informative as possible especially for a younger and international audience who may not know all the passing references. [2] The film can be found often on YouTube, often posted by fans of jazz musician Sun Ra, who appears with his band, in this rarest of footage of Ra's early career. But I would encourage anyone to obtain the excellent DVD version of film for better viewing and audio. [3] Other interviews and writers have been especially interested in Bland's music career; in this interview I've concentrated on the influences on and meaning of his single film. But I've also come to see *The Cry of Jazz* and Bland's career as being profoundly connected to its times, the changes in music and African American culture in the post WW2 era. The film was made in Chicago, and since I grew up there and returned to teach there I think Bland spoke more familiarly about those aspects of it.

I intend to write a follow up article providing a close analysis of the film itself. In it I will get to elaborate some points, but it will be useful for today's readers to remember or know that the film appeared at a key phase in the Civil Rights Era. The film itself does not mention specific recent events in the struggle, but the audience at the time would have been acutely aware of what the film's narrator, Alex, describes as the "savagery of white Americans." While the U.S. Supreme Court *Brown v. Board of Education* 1954 decision conventionally marks the start of the Civil Rights Era by ending legal school segregation, Americans witnessed national events on television, such as the 1956 attempt by a young black woman to enroll in the University of Alabama which resulted in whites rioting, and President Eisenhower's sending Federal Army and National Guard troops to Arkansas to hold back angry abusive whites and protect black students while Little Rock High School was integrated. In 1958 a black church was bombed during Sunday morning church in Birmingham, Alabama, killing four girls. These headline events and many smaller more local struggles were common knowledge at the first screenings in 1959.

CK: First of all, another teacher at Northwestern, Zeinabu Davis, said

Jazz musicians playing their instruments are shot in carefully framed shots with dramatic light. The close-ups also serve to hide the fact that the musicians were not recorded in synch sound, but serve to illustrate a separate jazz soundtrack. The first phase of Alex's explanation lays out the musicological basis of jazz, explaining formal elements such as harmony and rhythmic repetition as restraints, and melodic improvisation as freedom.

At several key moments in the film Natalie provides a foil for Alex by objecting to one of his statements. That then redirects the schooling. As Alex says that white America oppresses the Negro, Natalie objects that he's saying whites (like her) are "not human." This sets up Alex's next line of argument in a directly confrontational style. The film is remarkable in allowing both sides to strongly express their views heavily laden with emotion in the fictional drama sequences.

to say hello. She met you once at [filmmaker] Julie Dash's house here in Los Angeles. She said that she remembered one long evening where you started talking about the relation of jazz and film, and she said it just kept going on and on and on, and she loved it and she remembers that as one of the best times she ever had in LA. [4]

To start, can you tell me about how you grew up and how you got to the point of making *The Cry of Jazz*?

EB. I was born in Chicago, July 25, 1926. I lived there until World War II was on and I was drafted into the Navy. When I was a little boy, my father (Edward Bland) worked at the Post Office. But he was also a literary critic and active in literary groups. I would be forced to sit in some of his literary meetings and listen to people like Ralph Ellison or Richard Wright or Gwendolyn Brooks, and so on. [5] I hated it. I wanted to play baseball. (laughs) You know, I was thinking, "What's this guy makin' me do this for when I could be havin' some fun?" It was boring, you know. You're 7 or 8 years old, and this is boring shit.

I had grown out of a situation in my home where my father was a Marxist. I don't know if he ever belonged to the [Communist] Party or not, but there are so many ways in which that can be expressed, you know, like Socialism and the Socialist Party and Trotsky and all that other stuff. And my mother was deep into Voodoo. So here was I, right in the middle, (laughs)…in the middle of this mess.

Before I went in the Navy I had a couple of years of college because I got out of high school when I was 16. During my musical development, my mind started to expand. My father was an autodidact, and he had thousands of books around the house including, you know, (James Joyce's) *Ulysses* and I remember once he had me go get a book by Bertram Russell and I brought it to him, and he shows me Bertram Russell's picture and I say, "Oh, he's ugly." And my father being very stiff said, "It doesn't matter whether he's ugly. He's a great man. You understand that?" [EB replies] "Yes I understand that." (laughs) So all these books and influences were around. So then, I got into college, and I had a chance.

CK: But you were also involved in music.

EB: Well, put it this way, we were good. In those days, there was much more around for kids, young musicians, to do than there is now, paradoxically, and I was playing sax and clarinet in various bands around town. One of the places we would meet would be in Washington Park at the fieldhouse there. [6] You knew every musician from the neighborhood, and we had a little "big band." Well, one of the players who was in the Jay McShann Band, a saxophone player, was sitting next to me and we were jammin' and stuff and battlin' each other in solos and so it comes up, he says to me "I'm quittin' the band. Uh, if you want, I'll recommend you for my chair." And he says, "You'll

After his initial definition of jazz, Alex returns to the African American cultural nature of jazz. Interwoven with his exposition are illustrative shots that make their own connections through editing. In one sequence the editing cuts back and forth between a large religious service in a gospel church and a couple dancing to a juke box in the background, again rhythmic movement is seen in two very different environments: a dark club or bar setting and a bright congregation with several of the worshippers clapping hands and moved by the spirit to dance with the gospel music. Thus sacred and profane are linked as having a shared basis in black music.

be sitting next to a fella named Charlie Parker."[7] And, I knew about Charlie Parker. And so, I said "Well, I have to get permission from my mother." 'Cause my father was in the war. So she wouldn't give it.

CK: Well, you were pretty young.

EB: That, and plus she had the thing where she had to be able to say to people that my son is going to college. See. And so, anyway, I was caught in between that. I'm very happy I didn't go out on the road… Now! So, I went to school at Wilson Junior College. This was when Junior Colleges were good, and their music major was based on the two-year plan of the University of Chicago.

When Pearl Harbor occurred in 1941, I knew what I was going to go in the service. I was 15, and I was playing music. And I would meet all the sailors from the band up at [the US Navy training center] Great Lakes, and they said, "Be sure and get into the Navy band. You should have no trouble, you play so well." And so that was it. I went in the Navy in January of '45, and the War was over in August, and I spent a year, waiting, almost to the day to get discharged. I was stationed at Treasure Island [the major San Francisco Bay Area Naval Base].

You know, all I did was play the *Star Spangled Banner*, in the morning, and now and then we'd have some other duty, like play a dance. And that was it. And then things really became very rough after the war was over, because, you know, the country was celebrating. Consequently, we had duty all over. We had to be spiffy. You know all the admirals were coming through. We had to be neat as hell, things we didn't have to do before. Every button had to be buttoned. And we were marching up and down the streets of San Francisco all the time. (laughs) So, that was the rough time: after the war was over.

At that time, in terms of college, you started majoring in your Junior year, and I knew that music composition was what I wanted to do. But I didn't have the analytical tools that one needs to understand how a piece of music is put together. So, I was trying to read form and analysis books all the time. I'd go to the San Francisco Library all the time, but the books I found didn't make any sense to me. So I'd began to develop a fine interest in philosophy. Also I'd read all kinds of musical criticism, especially the leading composers' journal called *Modern Music*. I could see that the way in which writers criticized a piece of music was based on some type of philosophical assumptions. Those weren't explicit at all; but, consequently, I decided, that obviously, anything I write when I get down to composing, I'm going to have to defend in some way or another, so I may as well go further in philosophy also. So at least I'll know what the competing bases of various arguments are. And so, that is what made me go to the University of Chicago after the war.

Well, my father got killed in WWII. Gwendolyn Brooks dedicated her book of poems, *Annie Allen*, to him.[8] So, my father had gotten killed and we had a horrible family life. All of us. So I said well, maybe I'll stick around Chicago. 'Cause, I could have gone to Eastman [School of
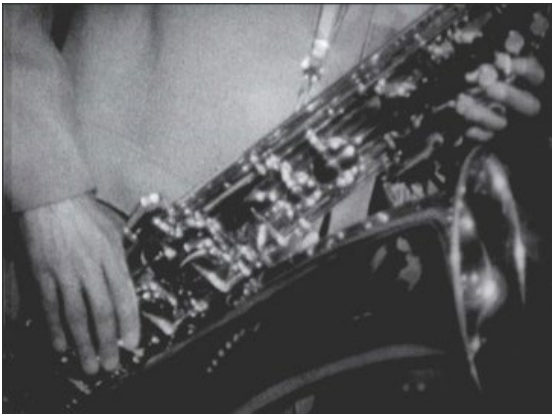
Having established the musical and social/cultural nature of jazz, Alex goes on to explain the historical development of jazz, accompanied by the Sun Ra group playing in successive styles: Dixieland, Swing, Be Bop, etc..

Blonde Faye, in contrast to blunt Natalie, repeatedly plays the role of reconciler, agreeing with Alex and urging him to elaborate his critique. Her body language repeatedly establishes her moves to get physically close to Alex, who responds with smiles. The others observe this behavior: the white guys and Natalie, negatively.

Music], I could have stayed out on the West Coast and gone up to Berkeley where Roger Sessions was. But I said you know I should give this family life one last chance. And so I did. And it didn't work: the family was just too dysfunctional, and it all dissipated, but that's one of the reasons I came back and stayed in Chicago. The other was, my very best friend was a mathematician who grew up in the same neighborhood, Eugene Titus. He was going to the University of Chicago, and we were like this *(motions with his hands)*. And so I decided, well I'll stay around Chicago a bit more and see just what happens.

The main reason to go to University of Chicago was, that I knew if I had gone to a conservatory, yes I'd learn all the *craft*. At Northwestern too, I would learn all the *craft* I needed, but I wouldn't know *why*. I had to find out what was, why was music conceived of in the manner in which was, in terms of writing contemporary symphonic music. And so I figured, well, I *know* University of Chicago is not a good school in terms of making all the connections you need to make and learning all the performance skills and things like that, but at least I can ask these questions---they'll tolerate my questions. So I went there. And they tolerated my questions, uhm for a little bit…(laughs)…up to a point. But they hated me, you know. But I didn't give a damn about that. 'Cause I had to get my answers. And you know, eventually, I did get either the answers or I knew how to get them.

So then I transferred to the American Conservatory of Music, and the UC Music Department was very happy to see me go. I finished up the rest of my GI Bill at American Conservatory. [9] And a little bit later, I studied with a modernist composer, an atonal composer in the Chicago area named John Becker, who used to teach at Chicago Musical College. I studied privately with him. Well Becker was one of the early American modernists like Charles Ives. [10]

CK: That's a really rich background.

EB: Oh yeah, well it is a very rich background. It gets richer..(laughs) Ok. Then eventually, it got to the point where I had to think about making a living. I'd given up playing altogether because I figured I had to get as far away from anything having to do with the jazz language as possible, to make sure that I made as pure a statement as possible of myself. And I could always go back. But having anything like that around me might keep me from going further and also give me easy ways out. You know I wanted to be as pure about it as possible. So, eventually I had used up all my, Navy benefits and had to think about getting a job, and by that time I had a kid on the way. So I started getting back in touch with my jazz musician friends and stuff. And I said, well I can always write popular songs. Which I could still. I was deep into Stockhausen and Webern and all that type of stuff, still.

So then, comes another period of richness. I started hanging around Chess Records. [11] And this was two or three years before Elvis. [12] [1956] And so, what you'd see, and it struck me immediately as something strange was going on, 'cause you'd hit Roosevelt Road right at Michigan and you'd see the Illinois Central tracks, and you'd see hundreds of people who just arrived from the South, walking, with their belongings wrapped up in newspaper and they were headed to

the West Side. [13] And blacks in Chicago who were more sophisticated —or so we should say the jazz lover types—were on the South Side.

So, some musician friends of mine introduced me to Chess Records. Chess wanted nothing but blues, so I had to remember how to write a blues, and then presented some Blues to Chess Records. And one of the owners looks at me and says, "We don't do business with people who have copyright on their music."

CK: (laughs) They wanted control!

EB: (laughs) And that was the beginning, when you begin to see what the plantation was, really. You know, they were very interesting guys. And when they started off, their main interest and love was jazz. But in order to stay in business they had to fulfill this market, as one of them said, "Look, we're not Mercury Records," 'cause you know, Mercury was downtown. [14] So they said, "but, we know if we make a Muddy Waters record we'll sell 40,000 copies." And then, as talent came up from the South, they had many, many people they could rely on. That, and using Gospel music. [15] And they had a captive audience, so to speak.

And so, we did not, you know, Chess Records and I didn't get along very well, 'cause I was very smart-assed at the time, and I was more interested in what was right, and so on and so forth. And it was obvious that one couldn't talk to any of the stars around there because they're making whatever they're making you know, and if you start telling them about how they can correct things, "well, *who are you*? (laughs) I'm makin' $350 a week. You know, if it wasn't for Mr. Chess, I wouldn't be making that. "

And right across the street from Chess was Vee-Jay. [16] Chess was in an automobile garage which they had refurbished into a recording studio. I remember one day sitting there and a disc jockey named McKee Fitzhugh called up—just dyin'. And Phil said, "*What?!?* White boys are buying our records at McKee Fitzhugh's record shop!" And they were pissing! [17]

I started thinking, uh-oh this could be a real structural change. Because you know, everything in the music business is just night and day, 90 days and the trend is over. What I started doing was getting *Billboard*, analyzing the top 100 records and seeing where they came from, and writing in that style, or a combination of those styles. And I ended up getting contracts with various publishers and stuff around town. Nothing ever with Chess Records, but I was fine. I liked being there just to watch the whole thing develop. Then Bo Diddley came along, a little later. And Bo Diddley got in, and you heard this stuff coming over and it sounded like sheer jungle stuff, you know. [18]

At that time, the covers were being made by the various singers who were like the Maguire sisters who were on the Arthur Godfrey Show. [19] I begin to see perhaps the blacks in this thing were avant-garde. I had to think of it in that way. Before, to me, the avant-garde was Stockhausen and Webern.

CK: Right.

EB: But at least I saw this phenomenon going on that might be somewhat interesting. And then, what was very evident from reading the trades back then was that these huge companies like, you know, Mercury, RCA, Columbia, Decca, London Records; it was about five or seven record companies that were pretty big at the time. They had all this power and clout and yet they couldn't control the market, you know. This was like what's happening now in terms of rap music. But there they were, and I said well this should be interesting to see just how this develops. And the answer to that, was after about two or three years of this new music not being under control, was Elvis. (And, Carl Perkins shoulda been the one, because he came out first with "Blue Suede Shoes" and but was the breaks.) The Chess Brothers were good friend with some of the records people. I think it was Sam Phillips, down in Memphis. [20] So, that's another item of richness yet, to see all this develop, and gauging this time, in terms of what's actually going on. It was another education.

Go to page 2

To top   Print version   JC 54   *Jump Cut* home

Responding to statements that whites can play jazz, Alex grants a slight concession, but clearly indicates white jazz doesn't have soul. He contrasts jazz style in two places. First we hear a more driving style accompanying African American men in an urban pool hall.Then we hear slow Cool Jazz as the visuals ironically shift to a suburban town's commuter train station, its snowy downtown shopping area with outdoor Christmas decorations, and a white woman grooming a dark-haired poodle, concluding with fluffing up the nappy hair on top of the dog's head.

Alex's history of jazz in the last third of the film is especially effective given the expressive styles heard on the soundtrack.

Making *The Cry of Jazz*

CK: Oh, that's fascinating. How did you decide to make your film?

EB: Well, *The Cry Of Jazz* came into being, let's see, something like this: There were four of us who were friends of a kind, with, various degrees of tension…Three of us were real close, and the thing is produced by a company called KHTB…

The K is for Mark Kennedy; the T is Eugene Titus, he was the mathematician; then there's, H, Hill, Nelam Hill. All three of these guys are dead now. And then the B is me. Kennedy was a novelist, he wrote something called *The Pecking Order*. [21] [open notes in new page] Ah, I think it was, came out in paperback as *Boy Gang*. Nelam was a city planner, and at one time he was head of urban renewal or city planning for Jersey City. Titus was a research aide, working at the Museum of Science and Industry for the Air Force on missiles. It was key to the scientific group for the Cold War. After Titus left Chicago he went to Dayton, Dayton Air Force Base, and then he moved back to Chicago and died. And there was me, and, my interest was musical composition.

And so, we were sittin' around drinking at Jimmy's. [22] Drinking off and on. Kennedy's book had come out, so he was heading out to New York. He was talking about some of the people he had met on the Near North side, and the power of film. You know how films could be done cheaply and inexpensively. So, and I knew something about film because my first job after being kicked out of schools was to score a film for the Anti-Defamation League in Chicago, called *To Live Together*, that came out about 1950. This guy, John Barnes later became head or close to head of Encyclopedia Britannica Films. [23] He worked out of his house. He had an editing bench all set up. In fact I saw how inexpensively it could be done, and I knew he was paying me, and there wasn't anybody else involved. I saw it could be done relatively cheaply if one wanted.

So, that rang a bell when Kennedy had said that. Plus, knowing how ubiquitous film was in terms of getting around the world, there was a possible source of propagandistic power if one wanted to look at it that way. So, at any rate, he was telling me about some people he had met on the Near North side, one was a film editor, his name was Howard Alk. [24] But it was a long time before I met Howard, but it just, stayed in my mind.

So, after Kennedy had left, me and some other kids around that were white start arguing about jazz, and before I knew it, the thing that was getting to me was that they were trying to take all the credit for its invention and everything else. And I said, "Fuck this shit!" They, first of all, they don't know anything, in terms of knowing the technical side of music or the historical side. And secondly, the way to put all this in perspective is to just make a film. We can do it quite cheaply.

So Nelham and I started thinking about that. We, got ahold of Titus who

Climaxing his analysis of the contradictions in jazz form, Alex startles his white listeners by saying that "jazz is dead." He elaborates, arguing that the music cannot transcend its inherent limits. This segues into a passage of increasingly discordant instrumentals. Images of destruction then appear such as an outdoor fire, with the rapid flickers of the flames matching the rapidly intensified music track.

Alex rests his case with the statement that the only way forward is for white America to accept Negro Americans as full members of society who can lead the way into a new future.

still lived in town, working at the Museum of Science and Industry. For money, whatever we could put together from our various jobs. It was mostly me and Nelham. I was working, I think, at the post office then. Nelham was at the Chicago Housing Authority. Kennedy was in New York. So, we sent scripts around and started planning. That's how it all started. It came off an argument that occurred, you know, in Jimmy's.

Then as it developed, you know the subject was bigger than music, especially after having seen what was going on with Chess and with migration from South to the North, and being able to put this stuff together. That's, that's how it started.

CK: How long did it take to make it from the time that you got the basic idea?

EB: The basic idea came out, probably in December of '56. And so we had this script and we had to try to find out what filmmaking was (laughs)... which we never did find out (chuckles) I don't know when we started. Let's see we finished New Year's Eve of '58, cause the next year was '59. The copyright date was '59 on that film, and I remember being at Howard Alk's place, and we very happy with what we had worked on. We were writing in '57 and rewriting, you know, auditioning and planning and, shot it in '58.

It's probably about spring of '58 when we took time out, for the guy we wanted, you know who was gonna edit, was the cameraman but he'd never done any sync editing, and so he had to bow out, and that's how Howard came in. And so I had gotten in touch with Howard, I went out to the Near North, and met with him, and showed him what we were doing and he said, "Well look, I'll work with you for nothing. Just pay for the rental of the movieola." Cause he was very busy as a commercial editor so, that we did and that's how it all started, in terms of getting the final phase going.

Howard was completely shocked by it, and but, nevertheless he worked with us, and was a beautiful cat. I didn't realize then that his closest friend was Paul Sills. [25] Cause I had known Paul from Hyde Park but I didn't know him from the Near North Side. So, then Paul came to town while we were in the midst of editing. That's when Second City started, and Al Grossman who ran The Gate of Horn. Howard and Al owned that. They had all those folk acts going. And I brought in Al Grossman. Nelham also knew Grossman, Grossman was also in housing, working for Chicago Housing Authority then. [26]

CK: Now where did it premiere? And how was, what was the reception like?

EB: Well the first time we had a chance to see the reception was at Howard's place. Howard has the equivalent of what would be called a loft these days...So he had a bunch of his friends from the North side over, including Odetta who was one of Grossman's clients at the time, and people from Near North and they had a fit. But you know it wasn't too bad.

Now, where did it really show first? Well we couldn't show it in any theaters in 16mm. And, at that time, nobody had dual capacity. I'm sure they do now in top theaters, or did, before the advent of video. It was shown at the Abraham Lincoln Center for about a month or so. [27]And nobody as I can remember was all that happy about it. Playboy was still in Chicago, and it was shown at the Playboy Jazz Festival (Aug, 1959) and then I think it may have gotten some reviews. [28]

And then about the same time we had sent a copy to Kennedy to see if he

could do New York, and he was the one who got Cinema 16. He was friends with Ricky Leacock and got Cinema 16, and Cinema 16 said well we want to premiere this in February, had to be February of '60. And we want to have a panel with you and Ed if you can come to town and uh, Marshall Stearns, Ralph Ellison, and Nat Hentof. [29]

And so, that happened. It was getting to the point that I was thinking about moving to New York anyway, because of the music. First my friends had come to town from various jazz groups and they were saying, well you oughta move to New York. And I said, well, what am I gonna do in New York? They said well you could work in music. I said but I'm not playing anymore. They said, well you could write.

And so James Moody came to town, a friend, a good friend of mine. [30] Moody asked me to write 20 arrangements for him, do some work on tunes for him. So I did that, and then knowing how musicians don't get paid, I said, "well, you know, the safest way to earn a living in music, and a good one, is by writing for recording sessions." This friend of mine had done some work for some recording sessions so I asked him what the scale was, and did he know people? Yes. So, with these 20 charts under my hand, I went to New York. Me and my wife had a boy, and so I went to New York in February of 1960. It was the first time I had ever flown in an airplane. I couldn't take the train, because some extra work had come up in Chicago, some film scores to do, so it was extra money, but I had to stay longer, and I wanted a night's sleep before I got on that stage; I decided to fly. [31]

So, I got there and started getting used to being in New York. There was some controversy at the screening, especially from a cat, Ralph Ellison. Kenneth Tynan wrote about the film for the London *Observer*. He said it was a historical document, in a sense. This was the first time he knew of in film that blacks had challenged whites period, you know, on any grounds, and whereas it may not had been the greatest film in the world, it was at least an historical moment. It should be noticed. And he called the acting and everything else amateurish, said it was on a slim budget and looked like it, and had second-rate music by somebody called Sun Ra. And then Dwight McDonald said, " A sorry paean of racial prejudice," I think it was in the *New York Magazine,* uh, so on and so forth. [32]

CK: So the controversy really erupted very fast.

EB: Well, the movie was called racist. I mean people wanted to know whether we belonged to the Muslims. [33] I'd virtually never heard of the Muslims. I knew they existed, but I knew, I'd seen people on street corners. But you see a lot of funny things on street corners in Chicago.

New York City years

EB: So that was the beginning of it. Now, right along with that, some how or another, Jonas Mekas knew that this was in the works. He was in Chicago visiting other Lithuanians a few times and we lived in the Hyde Park area, so he came by and visited, to see just how this film was coming along.[34] When I was going to New York, he kept me aware of how to move into the Lower East Side, paying only $35 or $40 a month rent. So I had money saved up, and we made the transition. New York is so strange, you know coming from Chicago.

I had been there once before, I was gonna move there in '49 but, there was a love affair involved and we broke up, so I didn't. The first time I saw it, I

said I'd never live here. Never. It was impossible. Buildings like this (he smacks his hands together, laughs) When I did finally get there, I realized, tempermentally it's very different place than Chicago. And my idea of New York was, ok, it's three times as big or was three times as big then, uh, then it's gonna be three times as rough as Chicago. So, but no, New York is a very soft and nice city, you know, once you realize the neighborhood character of it, and they've got this rough exterior but that doesn't mean anything. Very decent place. And I was sensing that, and I didn't wanna bring my Chicago aggressiveness, shall we say, to a place where it was inappropriate.

So, I didn't work for a year, you know I had enough saved up and I could stop, so I just met people, and tried to get a feel of the place cause it was very different. Among the people I met at that time was Shirley Clarke, Willard Van Dyke, Emile de Antonio; we all became great friends. Let's see. I met Pennebaker and Leacock and I'd hang with them, but I'd worked with Shirley on *The Cool World*. [35] Let's see who else: then the Mekas Brothers, Sheldon Rochlin, Lionel Rogosin. De Antonio was very interested in *The Cry*, and started talking to us about what the next film could be. [36]

CK: Well, you certainly were introduced to a lot of people. And you were working closely with different people. In the piece you wrote for *Film Culture* you wrote, about, you said you were planning another one. So, what happened with those plans?

EB: Oh, it was written, all right. What had to happen, was that we had to learn how to write. Let's see. This is probably the last copy I've got. This is what it ended up. (points to typescript). It took about, uh, ten years, it was like writing a novel.

And then once that was done, we got turned down I think at about a hundred and some places. And we didn't we didn't have the money to do this one. But at least it got done. It was good for me in a sense that it introduced me to what the discipline of writing was about.

Oh I had to earn a living. I'd had another kid, so I went to the record industry. I knew Clarke Terry and I met everybody, you know, a lot of guys I used to play with, especially when they were in positions with great connections. And so they introduced me to a lot of people. [37]

I wanted to do arrangements, behind singers, or for bands, so on. So, that's what I did. It was rough, at first, even with all the connections I had. I remember getting on the phone, and making 600 phones calls in six weeks, but I got my first job after that. Then I got two jobs in one day and started getting really good work. I was still looking for a full time job or a day job, so to speak, but it just wasn't happening. Finally I realized this is what I'm good at, and that's what I've done for most of my life.

But, all kinds of things happened, like from '68 to '74, I produced, close to a hundred concerts for the Museum of Modern Art: the "Jazz in the Garden Series," and the "Summer Garden Series." Also coming out of that was the Brooklyn Academy of Music. I think I did 30 or 40 concerts for them. Plus film work because of my connections with the New York City film people. I was making my living by doing all these different short term projects, except for the four years I was head of A&R for Vanguard Records.

CK: When was that?

EB: From '74 to '78. It was the result of all this time in the record industry.

They called me up and said do you want the gig, and it was the high point of a career. So I decided I better take it. I wanted to get back to writing, in fact I had started writing again. I decided to take it, cause I said I could always quit. (chuckles) But, you just don't throw power away, just like that. It was an interesting, another type of madness in itself.

Sun Ra

CK: What about Sun Ra? [38] Were you close to him, or had you just met him in the environment ?

EB: Ohhh. Well, Sun Ra, you know, having been a former jazz musician, I'd asked my friends from time to time what's happening, you know, who's doing what? And so, one of my friends mentioned Sun Ra, said he had this thing going on in the park in Chicago, and all this, what I considered weird talk. Fine. I don't care about that. What's the music like? So about he same time, during the time I was around Chess Records, I became a disc jockey, in Chicago, under another name, a jazz disc jockey, and played all this stuff, and among the records that came to my attention was a recording that Sun Ra had made, you know, on his on label. And it was absorbing, and quite decent, you know, the man was a good musician. So, when it became time to make *Cry of Jazz*, I could've written the music for it, but that would cost money so, the thing was how to get the jazz soundtrack without spending any money. So, I got in touch with Sun Ra, and I guess more of his representatives. Alton Abraham who was his manager at the time, the time we spoke, about using the music for the soundtrack of the film. And that's how it happened. And his music was certainly good enough and interesting enough to be used to illustrate some of the points, that I wanted to, in terms of music. So, that's how it happened. Uh, Sun Ra and I, uh, were miles apart, you know, temperamentally.

He was a likeable man, and stuff, and there's more to the story. We moved to New York. About a year after we're there, I get a call from Sun Ra. He's up in Canada. And he's asking me, "do you think we could make it in New York?" I said, "well, it's tough, but uh there's only one thing to do and that's to try." So he came by and whenever we had extra places for dinner and stuff, the guys, you know, John Gilmore and Pat Patrick, came by. [39] And then, things started happening for me in the record thing. Ok, so then, when I needed side men for these record gigs, I got Sun Ra. He needed the money anyway. Good musician, I mean, very virtuous musician.

And then, extra things would happen. A lot of these singers and songwriters couldn't read or write music. So, somebody would have to do the dictations and it wasn't gonna be me, so I'd get an additional part of the budget. Sun Ra was very patient with the guy. One of the people was the guy who wrote "Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On,"....Another Chicagoan, I forgot his name: Curlee Williams. [40] And the trouble with taking dictation from amateur songwriters is, each time you write something down, it changes the next time around. So it's a never-ending job. So anyway, Sunny grew a name for it. There was a budget there for him, so I used the guy as much as I could, instead of using regular studio musicians.

Another guy who hung around was Tom Wilson. Tom Wilson was the black A&R man at Columbia Records who gave us Simon and Garfunkel and Bob Dylan. I first met him in Chicago with Sun Ra. Tom was out of Boston and he had an MBA from Harvard, and he had this little record label, Transition, and he was doing some recording of Sun-Ra also, so when I got to New York I looked him up. He was on the Fidelity Records at the time

and I worked on many, many recording dates with Todd. He moved on to CBS and eventually gave us Simon and Garfunkel. And Dylan.

I stopped using Sunny because what happened was this: the key to any recording session is everybody has to be there on time. You gotta be ready to go. You got three hours, you got 14 weeks, you gotta do it. You know, it's not the most disciplined thing in the world, but it's disciplined, and you can't walk in at two o'clock. And if you're a drummer, you gotta be there a half and hour early in order to set up your paraphernalia. So..

CK: You're paying for the studio, and the time, and the engineers and everything.

EB: Right,. So it go to the point where Sunny was getting there late to the session times. And he had started complaining about how he was doing earth music. He didn't want to do earth music, he wanted to do his outer space stuff, I said well fine. Get yourself a record label. I didn't know who would record him. The only person I could think of who might record him might be Todd. And Todd didn't want anything. Todd was trying to establish his own realm, you know. But as he got more successful, he wanted less and less to do with Sunny. And, one, particular time, one, session we did, we had Sun Ra and part of the Blues Project, it was Danny Kalb and Al Cooper.

CK: I went to college with Danny Kalb. Yeah.

EB: But Sunny was talking about how earth music was a drag and I said well, I was doing him a favor, and then he starts showing up late for the sessions. I said, Sunny I can't have this. And uh, so, I warned him, and then he showed up late again so then I started using studio men, regular studio men. That was the last time I really had much to do with Sun Ra. I remember I had just started doing the MoMA concerts, and he wanted to know when I was gonna book him in there. And I said, "I can't. You know, you won't draw anybody."

Sexual politics

CK: one of the things my students always notice when they see it is a certain level of sexual politics in it. Within the film, one white woman is very obviously, it seems, very attracted to the black men. And at the same time, there is an antagonism there as well: the white guys function as sort of a counterpoint as well. Can you say some more about that?

EB: Well, there's not really much to say.

CK: The film shows the racial conflict, but my students, from today's perspective, say, well isn't there something else that's going on here as well? It's not just black and white; it's also men and women.

EB: Well, as expressed to the white/black thing, I can say that I imagine it's much cooler out there now, than it was then, but this was what was going on in terms of, that was the University of Chicago area. It's like, if you had a white girlfriend, and these were liberal guys, the guys would come up to you and wanted to know whether you were pimping. Who needed that type of shit? I mean that's insulting, and the other thing is, well, what it came down to, is they weren't getting nothin'. (laughs)

CK: (laughs heartily)

EB: And that's the problem. I mean, you know, put it this way: there wasn't that much of that, but I didn't need any of it in the first place. And secondly, it was uncalled for. Getting back to what you were talking about in terms of that club thing. There are no black women in that Parkwood Jazz Club scene. What happened in terms of that: we did try to get some black women in, but they wouldn't work for nothing. You see nobody, nobody got paid. We had 65 employees. And nobody got paid except the film writer, and Royal Stock Footage and the equipment rental place.

Distribution

CK: How was the film distributed? It was held by Grove Press Films for a long time, but then they disappeared.

EB: Well Cinema 16 originally screened it and they ran distribution too. But Grove bought Cinema 16, and about three or four years ago [1994] they closed down their film department.

CK: Right. So how is it distributed now?

EB: Well, people call me up.

CK: They just call you up and you send it to them.

EB: Right. It's got to be put on video.

CK: Oh, you have a website too? [41] [open endnotes in new window]

EB: In fact, that's why my wife wants me to do all this, so that I can put *The Cry of Jazz* up on the website.

CK: Oh! That would be fantastic!

EB: The thing that's most amazing to me: this film is 40 years old, you know, and I still keep getting people interested in it. To me, it's such ancient history. It's kind of gratifying in a way to think that something you did which was essentially artistically kind of a mistake in terms of music, but can have this kind of lasting power. I was talking to my wife the other day and said well, why are people doing this? To me it's old hat. She said look, if you are 25 years old, and you saw, you know a figure of history is now, you see Martin Luther King, leading some marches....And that's it. And you're 25 years old, and you see that for the first time, what would you say? And she was right, she was absolutely right, in that sense, (laughs heartily) It's a revelation.

CK: The course that I teach the film in is an historical course on avant-garde and film in the U.S.. When we get up into the transition, in the '50s and the '60s, I'm also showing other stuff like Shirley Clarke's films, and talking about how there's a whole efflorescence of connection between all these different areas: of music and poetry and filmmaking , and theater and so forth. I'm trying to give the students a sense of what this whole environment was like. Anybody who says that the Eisenhower years were totally passive and quiet isn't looking at the many ways artists were expressing things and developing things that later became full blown and open throughout the culture. Change was happening in culture. There was a lot of ferment at that time, which then in the '60s became obvious because of the political developments.

EB: Well abstract expressionists were brooding all over the place during the '60s, and aside from west coast jazz, there was all that fusion jazz, that was taking place. It's interesting. I was producing these concerts at the Museum of Modern Art. So Willard Van Dyke came up to me one day and says, "Ed, whatever happened to that film you did?" This was 1971. He saw it in 1960. I said Grove Press distributed it. He said, "I want to give you a couple days of screenings here." I said why? He said, "Well, that's the most prophetic film in film history." I said, "Yeah?" He said, "Yeah. It foretold the riots of the '60s and '70s, and the reasons for them." I said, "yeah, ok." It didn't strike me that way, but it was fine, I understand what he was saying.

CK: Now in the credits for the film, it said it was based on a book.

EB: That's a book I never finished...

Later career

EB: I worked for Vanguard Records from '74 to '78. It was the result of all this time in the record industry. They called me up and said do you want the gig, and it was the high point of a career. So I decided I better take it. I wanted to get back to writing; in fact I had started writing again. I decided to take it, cause I said I could always quit. (chuckles) But you just don't throw power away, just like that. It was an interesting, another type of madness in itself.

CK: And then eventually you moved to L.A.

EB: Well I left Vanguard in '78. We had a loft in Soho, but, as all things happen in New York, since that whole city is about real estate, the place got sold, so we had to think about what we were gonna do. I had a number of friends out here in films, you know, and I'd been invited out quite frequently to the University of California, San Diego, you know, La Jolla: as a visiting artist. So, I was out here quite frequently, and uh, made a number of contacts, and uh, so uh. All the composers opened doors for me, in terms of getting work, like Lalo Schifrin and Gerald Fried. [42]

So I was out here about 2 months, and I had my first film thing to work on which was *A Soldier's Story*. [43] I got to play the orchestrator on it. Herbie Hancock did the music, to the extent that any music was done. But, anyway that was my job. I didn't do any ghost writing, you know 'cause it was not about getting anything like that.

Then I did the music for a film called *House of Dies Drear* (TV movie, d. Allan A Goldstein, 1984) which was seen all the time on the Disney channels. [44] There was another one I did, *A Raisin in the Sun*. It was not good for film, but you know, they put a stage play on film, happens all the time, and I scored on that. [45]

And then about that same time, people started getting interested in my compositions and I started getting commissions and records. In the meantime, it was so crazy the Hollywood scene. It was crazy. I mean, I thought the record business a bad, but it was much crazier, and it was sicker, and so... things were coming all right in terms of the concerts, and so who gives a fuck about that? And that's the way it's been going since. In fact, I'm working on a CD right now. It's supposed to be out in June.

CK: Well this is really fascinating background. Obviously you've done so many different things, and being adaptable is absolutely central to working in this business.

I had some specific questions on a couple of moments in it. How do you feel now about the analysis that's presented in *The Cry of Jazz*? The argument that that you made?

EB: Many people have asked me, why don't you make another one? You know, and I say well, that was that, that was then. But in terms of anything additional, I would like to couch it this way: when the film was made the idea of black culture was not around. At the time we did it. You know, there may have been, maybe Herskovits had an idea or two. [46] But he wasn't highly regarded at all.

Once you understand the argument of black culture, that there is a persistent African heritage, shaped by the fact of slavery, then the film fits right into place. But in fact, that could not exist until somewhere around the mid or the late '60s, when many more people started talking about it. If I had anything I would add, I would add this film existed *before* the concept of black culture existed as we know it now.

CK: When I first saw it, I thought, wow, this film was made about six or seven years before Leroi Jones wrote *Blues People*, and the argument is very similar. [47] I had the sense he must have written his book because he saw the film, or something like that. You are both arguing a similar theme about the nature of black culture and the importance of how music fit in.

EB: You know I'd never met Leroi Jones, one. Two, my friends told me when we first got there, Leroi Jones hated *The Cry of Jazz*. Nelam told me (he died in '92, so I think it was about 6 or 7 years prior to that) he said that Leroi Jones was telling him how much he loved it then. And that he'd changed his mind. I never paid much attention to Amiri 'cause I knew he didn't know any music. And I really don't see how one can write very much about this unless one knows at least something besides one's feelings. The way I saw *Cry of Jazz* was there was a structural identity between the black experience and the nature of the music. Now Leroi Jones would not know what the structure of the music was, you see, or what the disciplines there were involved in order to achieve the various effects that were going on.

CK: Right, there is very little musicology in what he does. It's much more about the culture of individual artists.

EB: And the way he deals with that. And fine, you know, he's using music, I'm sure, like most people do. I mean, it's a consumer's thing. I like it, I don't like it, I don't have to know anything about it. I get a Baby Ruth, I don't have to know how that candy bar is made I like it. (laughs heartily) And then if you're forceful enough, you can tell people why your likes should be paid attention to.

I met Helen Levitt in New York, and she's good friends In fact, after I met her in New York she said, "Well, I hate the film, but I really want to know how you put it together." Just from a production angle: you get 65 people who work for nothing, and they get something done. It cost, maybe out of hand, about, two or three thousand dollars. One week we do Nelham's paycheck, next week we do my paycheck, maybe get a little bit from Titus and a little bit from Kennedy, and then, go around again. We had to postpone some bills to keep going.

CK: Well I show those films that Helen Levitt made in my classes.

EB: *The Quiet One*?

CK: *The Quiet One* and also *In the Street*. [49] I think what's happening now is that people have enough distance on things, to go back and to say, "What was going on there? Why was it going on? And let's find out more about it."

It's time for a re-evaluation. In terms of the whole area of independent film at that time, certain films got a lot of attention remained famous. Those are the ones that people keep writing about and, teachers keep teaching. I've always been interested in other ones that in a certain way haven't gotten the same amount of attention. That's one of the reasons why I've been interested in your film. One of the things that I just see is how the students have reacted to it. They say, "Wow, that was made, that was made in 1959, I can't believe it." They're really surprised and they're really provoked into thinking.

EB: Yeah well, all kinds of little things like that provoke thought. The film I worked on in 1950, doing the music, *To Live Together*: there's a line in it that's particularly cruel. One of the white girls is talking about one of the black girls, and she says, "Oh, it's ok, they're human, at least they're human too. That's what my father says." And that just struck me, I said, "Wow, that's very nice of her to say the words, human too." And that's why that line is in *Cry* there, you know, it fed off that. The assumption, or the arrogance as if nobody can question their humanity. And, if one did, you know, on what basis? Let's just do it another way. And, I just thought to myself, it's just interesting to me, that this is happening, that this interest is so hilarious. (laughs) But it kind of makes me feel good.

CK: I think artists often don't know who've they've affected, especially when you do something like film, cause it goes out in the world and you don't necessarily know all the audiences that are experiencing it. But when something is live performance, you know who experienced it. But when it's recorded, and it goes off in another way, it can go on for years and I think that s the wonderful thing about the film: it exists. So we can still see it, we can still enjoy it.

EB: You know. Well, what's even more interesting to me is getting the dovetail into something that is happening with my music right now. Namely this project that I'm working on. I've been hanging out with some rappers, in south central L.A. and I didn't realize that education had gotten to this point where people can't complete any more than two words together. Well, this is becoming interesting, this became interesting because it's something that's happening with the music. Anyway, I've been hanging out with these rappers, at a kind of community center arts place. It reminds me again when I was growing up. And the guy who runs it teaches film at Cal Arts, he runs the film department up at Cal Arts, Ben Caldwell.

CK: BEN CALDWELL!?

EB: You know Ben?

CK: I know Ben! I interviewed him about 5 years ago. Does he still have that little storefront?

EB: Yeah, KAOS Network. That's where it's all been happening. [49]

CK: I just love his work and, of course it fits together! I see all the connections now.

EB: Now, Every Thursday night, there's a rap jam session, of these up and coming rappers. Some of them want to know how to read music, so, I have a class.

You know, I own my own time, no obligation, you know, it's fine. I'm halfway curious about how these people think, you know, and what's the divide. And it's like teaching my grandchildren. This kid who I've been introducing to Auden, T.S. Eliot, and Pound, and telling him about that and the politics. But to get him look at it in terms of craft, that's all. I didn't expect the kid to go to the library, to get the books. I was shocked. And, he had these scarecrow clothes on (laughs) Three words was just about all he could say at once, and then you had to figure out what he'd said, you. But, he's sitting there listening to this CD I have coming out. And then he turns to me, he says, "You write rap." I said, "What?" You know I didn't say anything. "Yeah. Rap, without words." (claps his hands) And then it suddenly hit me, what he was saying… In the same way that the music is talking to his generation, so on, so forth, the film is too. And that is very satisfying, especially since I'm in good health. (laughs heartily) And plan on staying that way.

This kid is about the same age as my daughter, 23, the youngest, and I can talk to her just like that to, so, this is, it's getting to be interesting. I just wish *The Cry of Jazz*, was made a little better, but, it's representative.

CK: Well you know I think there's been a change too. In the later part 1980s I think in terms of video, a lot of people who were making work were much more willing to make something that was very didactic: "I'm gonna put forward a position, this is what it is," and so forth. But I think before that, it had been really discouraged in media making.

There were a whole lot of things that were going on, especially the attack on arts funding and stuff like that, suddenly artists who before hadn't ever questioned very much were suddenly saying, "well wait a minute: why is the government trying to take our money away, or why are they trying to censor us?" And I think a lot more people became actively involved. Then people from other social movements who were organizing around AIDS, the women's movement, stuff like that.

EB: With video it was so easy to do.

CK: Right. They had positions to put forward. We want to argue for things. And I think now people accept that much more, it's like, of course if someone has a strong opinion and they make a work of art demonstrating that, it's not so exceptional. In that sense, *Cry of Jazz* has an audience today…

EB: Very good point.

CK: I don't think that you have to apologize very much for the way that it was made. It's obvious it was made on low budget.

EB: Well I'm a perfectionist. That, that's why to me, it's kind of a strange thing to have in my background. I don't do anything until I know it's gonna be so smooth and so polished. But it's the only thing I've ever done out of anger. In

the sense that, obviously there's anger behind the work, in this film it shows. In my other work, you'll get an anger, but it's never up front. I was noticing in the late '60s and '70s too, the cinema verité movement came along, which made art of the things that people hate, so many things had happened in *The Cry of Jazz* visually and stuff, began to be art, suddenly. Not that we were thinking cinema verité, in all honesty we weren't. It was just a matter of what we didn't know, it was our crudity. But that crudity is now art. (laughs heartily) And now, didacticism is kind of the accepted norm because of so many competing positions that have to be documented. And because of the ease of use, video equipment. You know everybody can be a video filmmaker. It's not like carrying a Mitchell or an Arriflex around. Interesting, how things just change. Some things for the better. Or to one's gain. It's funny.

Go to Notes page

Notes

1. I want to acknowledge the help of many people on this project. First of course, Ed Bland who was generous and gracious in giving me the interview and answering so many questions. Nina Cartier's work in transcribing the interview was outstanding. Many people who shared a deep interest in the film offered help, encouragement, and direct support, including: Jacqueline Stewart, Anna McCarthy, John Corbett, Terri Kapsalis, Zeinabu irene Davis, Amy Beste, Patrick Friel, Brenda Webb, Martha Biondi, Jacqueline Goldsby, Michael Martin, Joe Hendrix, the late JoAnn Elam, and Chicago Filmmakers, the Hyde Park Art Center, and Indiana University. [return to page 1]

2. I suggest keeping the notes window open while reading the article. Unless otherwise noted, most of the factual information comes from Wikipedia entries and Ed Bland's own website: http://www.edblandmusic.com/index.htm. I attach a bibliography at the end.

3. "Unheard Music Series," at www.atavistic.com and MVD Music Video Distributors.

4. Zeinabu irene Davis was in the UCLA filmmaking program in the 1980s. Among her 13 films to date, she made an experimental portrait piece of the pioneering black jazz musician, Clora Bryant: *Trumpetistically, Clora Bryant* She is currently completing a feature documentary on the LA Rebellion filmmakers *Spirits of Rebellion: Black Film at UCLA*. Julie Dash (*Illusions, Daughters of the Dust*, etc.) was one of the first LA Rebellion filmmakers.

5. The U.S .Postal Service was a significant employer of African Americans at the time, guaranteeing a stable good wage, and relative equality. This job marked Bland Sr. as a well-established member of the black working class. The post office also has a long history of being a base for artists and intellectuals.

In the early 1930s the Communist Party USA encouraged the formation of John Reed Clubs as meeting places for intellectuals, writers, and artists with left sympathies, both party members and nonmembers. This "proletarian" phase ended with the clubs being dissolved in 1934 in favor of a new approach to a Popular Front against fascism.

Ralph Ellison probably didn't attend any Chicago meetings since he went to NYC after completing his college music studies at Tuskegee, but Richard Wright was certainly a presence. Aspiring novelist Wright came to Chicago in 1927, worked at the Post Office until laid off in 1931, and joined the John Reed

Club and later the Communist Party itself, leaving for NYC later in the decade. Chicago's African American writers and artists in the 1930s have yet to receive the critical attention that's been paid to Harlem based people of the same period, but a new study by Lawrence P. Jackson, *The Indignant Generation*, begins to correct that. Poet Gwendolyn Brooks remained an active presence in Chicago circles. Notable figures such as Arna Bontemps and Margaret Walker were also part of the South Side writer's community.

6. Washington Park is a 372-acre city park west of the University of Chicago area on the South Side. After WW1 it was a site of contention between whites and the expanding black community. Several semiprofessional black baseball teams played at the park starting in the 1920s. The fieldhouse was a major community center. Since 1961 the park has been the site of the DuSable Museum of African American History.

7. Jay McShann had a highly regarded blues and hard bop big band in the late 1930s and 40s featuring Charlie Parker (1937-42), Ben Webster, Al Hibbler and others.

8. Gwendolyn Brooks published a poem in his memory following the senior Bland's death in the Battle of the Bulge in 1945. He was in his late 30's, married with a child, when the war broke out and would not be drafted. He volunteered for service, and according to the commemorative line of Brook's poem volunteered for a dangerous mission. The poem was included five years later in her 1950 collection, *Annie Allen*, which was also dedicated to Bland's memory. The book won the Pulitzer Prize.

9. American Conservatory was a major musical college, based in Chicago. The GI Bill was a program of benefits for veterans that provided a stipend for service people getting formal education.

10. John J. Becker was known as one of "The American Five," leading US modernist composers at the time, along with Ives, Henry Cowell, Carl Ruggles, and Wallingford Riegger.

11. Chess Records was formed in 1950 by Leonard and Phil Chess, after Leonard had earlier acquired and worked with another record company. Chess quickly became famous for producing record of Chicago urban blues, recording artists such as Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, John Lee Hooker, Bo Diddley, Etta James, and many others in the 1950s. Chicago blues was a vernacular blend of Deep Southern rural blues, especially from Mississippi origins, and electrified instruments and amplified music and voice suitable for the noisy atmosphere of street corner and barroom performance. As Bland indicates, Chess was a classic case of white businessmen making sharp deals with black performers and maintaining control of the rights and profits. A recent dramatic feature film, *Cadillac Records* (d. Darnell Martin, 2008) presents a nostalgic picture of the studio.

12. Elvis Presley began recording and performing regionally in 1954. His first national hit was *Heartbreak Hotel*, 1956.

13. Bland is marking his own observation, but it certainly was a generally

known phenomenon. The first Great Migration of African Americans from the South to the North began in the first years of the 20th Century resulting in establishing the black neighborhoods of the South Side. A large Second Migration began at the start of WW2 and continued in the postwar era. Chicago, directly connected by railroads to Mississippi and Louisiana was the logical direct terminus for arrivals from those areas. During the 1940s, the black population of Chicago increased by 77 per cent, from 278,000 to 492,000. In the 1950s, it grew by another 65 per cent, to 813,000; at one point 2,200 black people were moving to Chicago every week.

In the postwar era, the new mechanical harvesting of cotton vastly reduced the need for agricultural labor in the South. So the new arrivals often came directly from rural life and with less urban experience or trade skills than the several generations of earlier black immigrants now resident in Chicago. In a familiar pattern worldwide, the recent labor migrants were seen as less sophisticated country cousins, and they found less expensive housing on the West Side as opposed to the longer established South Side areas such as the Bronzeville neighborhood.

14. Mercury, begun in 1945, was the major record label for post-swing era jazz with two powerful A&R (arrangement and recording) executives: John Hammond and Norman Granz. Mercury had the lead in bebop and contemporary jazz.

15. Chicago was the world center for Gospel music after WW1 and this continues to the present day. Thomas A. Dorsey, widely known as the father of black gospel music, started as a jazz and blues musician but changed to religious choral composition and conducting in the 1920s. His work, and the movement he inspired, combined Christian praise with rhythm and blues rhythms.

16. Vee-Jay Records was founded in 1953 in neighboring Gary, Indiana, and moved to Chicago. It was owned and operated by African Americans and specialized in blues, jazz, and rhythm and blues and eventually rock 'n' roll. Another important company, Chance Records (1950-54) was also near the Chess office on S. Michigan Ave, Its list featured blues, jazz, doo-wop, and gospel.

17. McKee's Bop Shop, located in the Bronzeville neighborhood, at 47th and South Park Way (now MLK Drive), was across from the Regal Theater, a huge movie palace from the 1920s serving the black South Side, which also had large stage shows of black performers. While residentially segregated, white enthusiasts for black performers could see the headliners at the Regal, and then buy "race records" at McKee's record store. This nascent cross-over boosted the market size for black urban music.

18. Bo Diddley established his Chicago presence playing as a street performer and later with club gigs. His first record for Chess, "Bo Diddley" went to the top of the R&B charts in 1955.

19. Godfrey was a radio personality, and in the postwar era a TV host and pitchman, who had a daily morning chat and light entertainment show and a weekly TV show, "Arthur Godfrey's Talent Scouts," which followed the trope

of introducing amateur performers to a national audience.

"Covers" originally meant records or airplay broadcast of music originally performed by another musician. This was actually very common in a time when sheet music sales were central to the business, and a "hit" was established by tune and lyrics more than the unique first performer's interpretation. Thus the weekly "Your Hit Parade" radio (and later TV show) gave a countdown of the top ten hits, performed by the same studio band and stock regular singers. As the business changed with more star and celebrity values, individual performance values (including arrangements and orchestration) made copies much less desirable in the market.

However the persistence of racism in marketing produced the parallel case of white performers being favored by the big record companies to copy (in a vastly milder way) songs that had originally been recorded by black artists. The original African American artists were thus denied cross-over and sales. For example, Arthur Godfrey "discovered" Pat Boone, who did R&B cover versions exuding his clean-cut white middle class suburban image.
In contrast, Elvis presented a lower class rebel image with long sideburns, long slicked hair, and flashy clothes. Presley's rockabilly was a fusion of white country music and black rhythm and blues.

20. Sam Phillips founded Sun Records and Sun Studios in Memphis, Tennessee, in the 1940s. He discovered and promoted Howlin' Wolf, Carl Perkins, Jerry Lee Lewis, Johnnie Cash and most famously, Elvis Presley. Presley fulfilled Phillip's often quoted goal: "'If I could find a white man who had the Negro sound and the Negro feel, I could make a billion dollars.'" Chess Records formed a business relation with Phillips in 1951, making and distributing many records that Sun recorded, notably Howlin' Wolf.

21. *The Pecking Order* (1953) follows a group of five black youth as they go on an escalating violent crime-spree rampage. []

22. The Woodlawn Tap, 1172 E. 55th St. in Chicago, was called Jimmy's after the owner. Opened around 1950, it was the closest bar to the U of Chicago campus and known for attracting neighborhood locals, artists and intellectuals, and also university people.

23. *To Live Together* was John Barnes' first film. It depicts a summer camp with children of different races, showing that they have a natural tendency to get along, but what prejudices appear are the results of their parents' attitudes. (30 min b&w, 16mm, co-written with H.H. Schuler; sponsored by the Anti-defamation League of B'nai B'rith). He dropped out of the University of Chicago and in the postwar era was active in theatre, moving into radio and television and film as writer and director. He regularly made films for Encyclopedia Britannica films, winning many awards and had a long career in educational and documentary film, completing over 100 works.

24. Howard Alk entered the University of Chicago at 14 and was a member of a cabaret theatre group. He also worked with Paul Sills and many others in the early improv and folk music scene in Chicago while also working as a film editor. His best known work was on the New Left films *American Revolution*

2 and *The Murder of Fred Hampton* with producer Mike Grey.

25. Paul Sills attended the University of Chicago and was active in theater there. In 1955 he founded the first improvisational theatre group in the U.S. and in 1959 began the famous Second City group with partners, including Howard Alk.

26. Albert Grossman, born and educated in Chicago, worked for the CHA in the postwar era, leaving it to start The Gate of Horn, a 100 seat folk music revival venue in 1956. He parlayed that into artist management, most famously representing Bob Dylan 1962-70.

27. The Abraham Lincoln Center, 700 E. Oakwood, was a large community center designed by Frank Lloyd Wright and Dwight Perkins in 1905 as a supplemental building to All Souls Unitarian Church. It had an auditorium and served as church administration space, a settlement house, hostel, social and educational center.

28. A three-day indoor festival held at the Chicago Stadium, with remarkably low ticket prices, attracted 68,000. Two years earlier *Playboy* began an annual Jazz Poll, highlighting various star musicians. Although *Playboy* by then had its offices on the Near North Side (along with the first Playboy Mansion), the first issues were put out by Hugh Hefner on his Hyde Park kitchen table in the early 1950s. It was estimated that one out of every four college males bought *Playboy*, and as primarily a lifestyle magazine, its featuring of jazz contributed to the marketing of the music to the younger white middle class. The U of C students that Bland argued with at Jimmy's likely had their own attitudes shaped by Playboy's biases and perspectives which tended to value and validate white musicians disproportionately. In Nelan Hill's papers (held at the NY Public Library), a letter from Bland reports he engaged in a heated discussion after the film was screened at the festival.

29. Cinema 16, run by Amos Vogel, was a regular film society series in the postwar era which played a wide range of art films: European and U.S. classics, experimental and documentary films. Because it was a membership group it could evade some of the city censorship rules that governed commercial theaters.

Marshall Sterns, a professor of English, was a widely published jazz critic who had recently published *The Story of Jazz* (1956), one of the first comprehensive books on the subject. Civil libertarian activist and journalist Nat Hentof extensively covered jazz music for various publications including the *Village Voice* weekly. The original announcement of the event listed novelist James Baldwin as one of the panelists, but Ralph Ellison replaced him on the actual date. Ellison had trained in college as a musician, and regularly wrote on jazz while also writing his own fiction, such as *Invisible Man* (1952).

30. James Moody was one of the top saxophone and flute jazz and hard bop musicians of the era.

31. Amy Beste's research for her dissertation found Bland created music and soundtracks for several filmmakers who worked freelance in the large postwar Chicago educational film industry. *Here Is My Hand* (d. Robert Konecky, 1957-58) was commissioned for the long standing national community based civil rights group the Urban League. Many of the crew on that film also contributed to *The Cry of Jazz.* Bland also worked on five or six films with Robert Longini, who freelanced sponsored film and taught at the Institute of Design. Finishing these projects delayed Bland from his New York trip.

32. British journalist and critic Kenneth Tynan, now best remembered as a theatre critic, was in NYC and regularly wrote about the U.S. and its cultural life for British publications. Dwight MacDonald was well known as a cultural critic who leaned left in politics and despised mass culture or middlebrow culture.

33. The Nation of Islam (NOI) had been little known outside of the black community until the TV documentary series, "The Hate That Hate Produced." Produced by Mike Wallace and Louis Lomax, it premiered in summer 1959. The NOI was separatist, rather than integrationist, and the reportage framed the group as preaching "a gospel of hate" against whites. The TV documentary prominently featured NOI's dynamic and articulate leader Malcolm X, bringing him to national attention.

34. In addition to being an active filmmaker, Jonas Mekas was a tireless promoter of the New American Cinema movement. He founded Film Culture magazine in 1954, wrote a regular column on experimental films for the *Village Voice* weekly in NYC, organized the Film-makers Coop for distribution of the new work that was appearing as the New American Cinema, and helped found Anthology Film Archives. A postwar refugee from Lithuania who had been a forced laborer in Nazi Germany, Mekas was widely recognized as a major poet writing in the Lithuanian language.

35. Filmmaker Shirley Clarke by that time had made several short experimental films. She directed a feature, *The Connection* in 1962, based on a stage play which featured diegetic jazz performances by Jackie McLean and Freddy Redd . She also directed *A Cool World* in 1964 which realistically depicted a 15-year old boy dealing with Harlem ghetto life.

36. Jonas Mekas (above) along with his brother Adolphus was an active filmmaker. Shedon Rochlin was active in independent filmmaking circles making producing and later distributing new work. Lionel Rogosin made the neo-realist drama *On the Bowery* about New York's Skid Row in 1956 and went on to make the anti-Apartheid *Come Back, Africa* clandestinely in South Africa (1960). Emile de Antonio moved in Pop Art circles in NYC at the time and formed a company to distribute the Beat Generation film *Pull My Daisy* (d. Robert Frank and Alfred Leslie, script by Jack Kerouac, 1959). He went on to make left political documentaries. Willard Van Dyke was a photographer in the Edward Weston tradition in the 1930s and turned to filmmaking, doing cinematography on *The River* (Pare Lorenz, 1938) and *The City* (1939). He directed the MOMA film department 1965-73.

37. Trumpeter Clark Terry worked with the Duke Ellington and Count Basie

bands in the 1940s and went on to play with many different groups and as a recording session sideman. He is regarded as one of the top modern jazz trumpeters and is the most recorded horn player of all time (over 900 sessions).

38. Musician Sun Ra had a long career starting with work in big bands in the 30s and continuing with his own various groups for decades. His work was decidedly too esoteric for the more commercial record labels and venues, but he had a loyal following and core group of superb musicians. He became increasingly identified with a trend some label "Afro-Futurism" in which he promulgated a whole myth or interpretation of himself as having an alternative or astral origin. Since his death and an authoritative biography (John F. Szwed, *Space Is the Place: The Lives and Times of Sun Ra*, 1997) was published, he has attracted much more interest and following, which has in turn created an interest in *The Cry of Jazz* which contains rare footage of Sun Ra in the 1950s.

39. Gilmore (tenor sax, bass clarinet) and Patrick (baritone and alto sax) had long careers with Sun Ra's groups.

40. "Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On" was Jerry Lee Lewis's huge rockabilly crossover hit, going to the top of the pop, R&B, and country charts in February 1957. The writing is disputed with Dave "Curlee" Williams and James Fay "Roy" Hall splitting the credit. Another example of white cover versions of songs first done by blacks, the song was first recorded with Big Maybelle two years earlier, produced by Quincy Jones.

41. Bland's current website: http://www.edblandmusic.com
[return to page 3]

42. Argentine composer, conductor, and pianist Lalo Schiffren had a jazz orchestra in Buenes Aires before coming to the US c. 1960 and working with Dizzy Gillespie and many figures. He is best known for writing compositions for film and television, including many theme songs with strong jazz elements.
Gerald Fried has a long career composing for film and television beginning with his boyhood friend Stanley Kubrick. He collaborated with Quincy Jones on the score for the miniseries *Roots*.

43. *A Soldier's Story* (d. Norman Jewison, 1984) is a filmed adaptation of a stage play by Charles Fuller. In WW2 a black soldier is killed in the Deep South and an African American Army attorney is sent to investigate. For its time, it had a prestigious black cast, but suffered from being stagey rather than cinematic.

44. Children's Television Workshop production from a Young Adult novel. A black family moves into a house in rural Ohio and the young teen son discovers it was used as a station on the Underground Railroad to smuggle runaway slaves before the Civil War. Caves, tunnels, ghosts.

45. The TV series *American Playhouse* presented *A Raisin in the Sun* (d. Bill Duke, from the play by Lorraine Hansberry) in its 1989 season.

46. Melville J. Herskovits, American anthropologist, pioneered the analysis of African culture and its continuation in the Western hemisphere. Based at Northwestern University, he influenced generations of students. For example, his work, *Life in a Haitian Valley*, 1937, examining Voudon ritual and performance influenced dancer/choreographer Katherine Dunham, writer Zora Neale Hurston, and filmmaker Maya Deren, each of whom visited Haiti and wrote about Voudon culture.

47. Leroi Jones (changed name to Amiri Baraka) was a Beat Generation poet and editor at the time the film premiered in NYC. His first book of poetry appeared in 1961. *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*, 1963, is a landmark study which all subsequent writers have had to take into account.

48. Street photographer and film editor Helen Levitt shot *In the Street* (1948) on children's street life in Spanish Harlem. She was cinematographer and writer on *The Quiet One* (1948) working with Janice Loeb, James Agee, and Sidney Meyers. The film is a portrait of a Harlem boy with a dysfunctional family who finds a better life in a special school.

49. Filmmaker Ben Caldwell, one of the key figures in the "L.A. Rebellion," founded KAOS Network as a community arts project training youth in digital arts and multimedia arts in Leimert Park, Los Angeles. The center hosts WORDshop, a workshop for hip-hop artists, singers, and dancers. It is connected with Project Blowed, promoting West Coast underground hip hop. http://www.projectblowed.com

Should the Dark Knight have risen?

by Todd McGowan

Limbaugh contra Robespierre
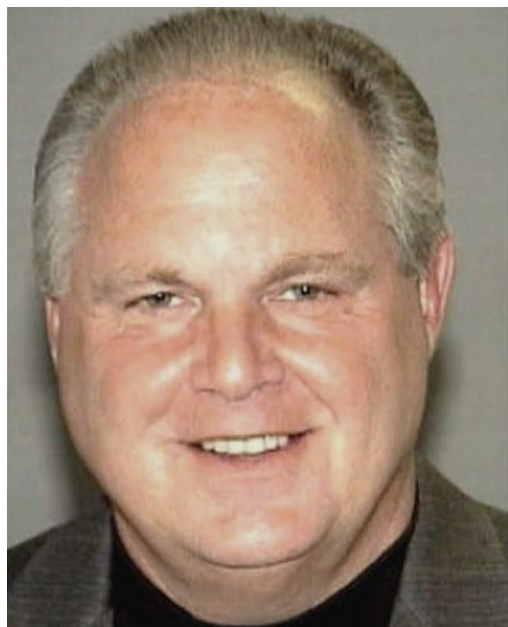
Rush Limbaugh attacks the association of Bane with Bain Capital before the release of *Dark Knight Rises* but is silent after the film appears.

In the days before the release of Christopher Nolan's *Dark Knight Rises* (2012), Rush Limbaugh expressed trepidation about the political impact that the film would have on the upcoming election. Given the controversy surrounding Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney's activity at his company Bain Capital, the name of the summer blockbuster's villain, Bane (Tom Hardy), portended, in the mind of Limbaugh, a nefarious Hollywood plot to undermine Romney's presidential campaign by associating Romney with a villain out to destroy a popular superhero.[1] [open endnotes in new window] Though Limbaugh's comments generated great controversy prior to the film's opening (leading to a minimal retraction after much critique), he didn't follow up on this critique after the release of the film. In fact, no prominent conservative cultural critics took up Limbaugh's mantle and substantiated the Bain/Bane connection after viewing the film. This is because, to all appearances, Nolan has made a fundamentally conservative film. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Nolan has tried to appease Limbaugh even prior to the articulations of his grievances.[2]

In fact, this has largely been the leftist response to the film. Critiques of the film focus on the brutal images of those articulating a revolutionary, anti-capitalist message. One critique notes,

> "The result is the caricature of what in real life would be an ideologically committed revolutionary fighting structural injustice. Hollywood tells what the establishments want you to know— revolutionaries are brutal creatures, with utter disregard for human life. Despite emancipatory rhetoric on liberation, they have sinister designs behind."[3]

Robespierre and the French Revolution seem to be the target of the critique in the film, not contemporary capitalism and its representatives like Bain Capital.

In clear contrast to Limbaugh's fears, Nolan's film fits comfortably within a universe in which the head of Bain Capital is the enemy of Bane, not his doppelganger.

The film seems to target the emancipatory spirit of the French Revolution as its primary object for critique. In lieu of storming the Bastille, Bane storms Blackgate Penitentiary and frees the inmates imprisoned according to the Dent Act, which includes stricter penalties and denial of parole to those involved in organized crime. Bane also attacks the Gotham Stock Exchange, and his overthrow of the city leads to the establishment of a revolutionary tribunal that sentences aristocrats to death.[4] He initiates what appears to be a repetition of the Reign of Terror.[5] The eulogy that James Gordon (Gary Oldman) offers after the apparent death of Batman/Bruce Wayne (Christian Bale) punctuates the parallel with the French Revolution, as he recites the final lines of *A Tale of Two Cities*. Talking about

A celebration of the Dent Act that leads to the denial of parole to criminals with ties to organized crime.

Bruce, he says,

> "It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known."[6]

This concluding citation from a novel condemning the excesses of the French Revolution seems cement the film's anti-revolutionary politics.[7]

In addition, the villains in *Dark Knight Rises* speak the language of emancipatory revolution and even of class struggle. They proclaim their desire to free the people from their oppressors and to a create a situation in which, in the words of Marx,

> "the expropriators are expropriated."[8]

The peaceful status quo of Gotham is one where the upper class live in crime-free opulence while many in the underclass find themselves relegated to the vast underground sewer system. The film highlights the injustice of this class system, but the primary voices of the indictment are those of the villains.

Bane offers the most pronounced and sustained critique of the class politics in Gotham. He leads a version of the Occupy Wall Street movement as he takes over the Gotham Stock Exchange.[9] Then, when he finally takes power in the city and collapses much of the infrastructure, he announces to the people,

> "We came here not as conquerors but as liberators, to return this city to the people."

Later, he leads a raid on Blackgate Penitentiary with the goal, as he puts it, of "freeing the oppressed." But Bane's emancipatory rhetoric serves as a cover for a terrorist plot that aims at the destruction of Gotham through atomic explosion.

In response to Bane's faked revolutionary movement, the film seems at a loss to show an authentic emancipatory alternative. As Andrew Barnaby notes, the sole political virtue of the film seems to be negative. There seems to be no hope for any revolutionary collective action. He says,

> "We are left with a few honorable individuals … but not much else to cheer for. Is there a point there? We shouldn't have a revolution unless we can really diagnose the problem or unless we know what would count as success."[10]

The film is, at best, a warning about the failures of emancipation. At worst, it represents the moralization—and thus the evisceration—of political struggle.

Charles Dickens's novel *A Tale of Two Cities*, a critique of the French Revolution, provides a narrative foundation for *Dark Knight Rises*. Nolan mentions it as an influence.

Bane leads a takeover of the stock exchange in Gotham. He appears here like a figure from Occupy Wall Street.

Bane frees the prisoners from Blackgate Penitentiary. This adds to his stature as a revolutionary hero on the side of the oppressed.

Dark Night Rises makes evident the limitations of every superhero and the kind of thinking—predominant today—that leads to the veneration of superheroes and the production of superhero films. All that Batman can do is to save the lives of the people of Gotham. He cannot assist in forging a people's movement or an emancipatory struggle. This is the limitation of every superhero. By definition, the superhero acts alone or in a small group; there is no image of a collective

James Gordon is just an individual fighting against injustice. This seems to be the only avenue that the film proposes.

Many of Nolan's films, like *Memento*, begin with deception in order to reveal how deception is integral to truth. We discover truth through deception, not by avoiding it.

superhero. But *Dark Knight Rises* has the virtue of showing why the superhero cannot constitute a collective movement: the superhero as such cannot escape the idea that he or she has a true identity beneath the mask.

The film shows that both the limits and the power of Batman and the figure of the superhero as such emanate directly from the source of the superhero's allure—the complex status of the mask. The prevailing leftist critique of the film correctly identifies the problems that the film encounters in its content, in the events that it depicts. *Dark Knight Rises* fails to depict successful emancipation and its negative portrayal of attacks on social inequality proffer an implicit apology for that inequality. But formally, through its celebration of the role that the mask plays relative to truth, the film provides political insights that belie its content. In the film, the mask is at once the site of truth and the site of collective identification. It is only on the basis of the mask that one can form a collectivity because it allows one to see that one's true self forms through the confrontation with the Other and doesn't exist prior to or outside this confrontation. The retreat from the mask is the retreat from truth and from collective struggle. This is the film's great formal insight.[11]

But the act of wearing a mask leads the superhero to believe that there is a true identity that the mask hides, and this true identity is necessarily individual. This is the source of the superhero's political failure. Even though *Dark Knight Rises* radicalizes Batman by transforming him from a figure of mastery to one of servitude, it concludes with his retreat into an authentic identity beyond the mask. When he does this, he fails to recognize that the mask or the fiction contains in itself his true identity. Bruce's lifelong servant Alfred leads him into the illusion of the true self beneath the mask, so we might say that Alfred is the villain of *Dark Knight Rises*.

The mask is the truth of the superhero. Rather than hiding a true identity, the mask exposes the trauma that defines the superhero.

Alfred, the servant who sees a true identity behind the mask, is the film's villain. He wants a normal life for Bruce Wayne and thus betrays the truth found in the mask of Batman.

The Yugoslav attack

Christopher Nolan often begins his films with scenes meant to deceive the spectator. We see what seems to be the killing of the murderer of the wife of Leonard (Guy Pearce) in *Memento* (2000) or the involvement of Borden (Christian Bale) in the drowning of Angier (Hugh Jackman) in *The Prestige* (2006). In both cases, the films subsequently reveal that this initial impression has misled us entirely. As I note in *The Fictional Christopher Nolan*, deceiving the spectator is Nolan's method for leading the spectator to a new truth.[12] The initial deception in *Dark Knight Rises* is perhaps the most extreme of these since it involves a spectacular stunt, the kind of stunt that testifies to the authenticity of those perpetuating it. Though audacious stunts often seem cinematically faked, they typically reveal authenticity within the filmic diegesis because the extremity of the act requires total commitment.[13]
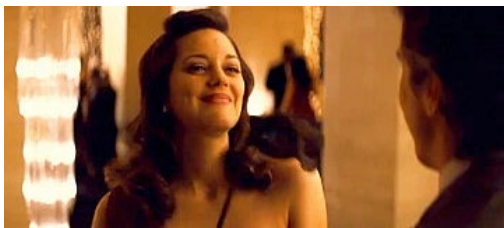
Such is the case with Bane's rescue at the beginning of *Dark Knight Rises*. As the CIA takes the recently captured Bane back to the United States in its aircraft, Bane's followers fly above in a larger aircraft and lower themselves into the CIA plane in order to free their leader. During the rescue, Bane's followers evince not just the courage necessary for the midair attack, but they even demonstrate total devotion to Bane and his cause. One refuses to identify Bane even under the threat of being thrown from the plane as a result. Another, even more astonishingly, accepts Bane's insistence that he go down with the plane. As he prepares to escape, Bane says to him, "No, they expect one of us in the wreckage, brother." Rather than plead for his life, the follower merely says, "Have we started the fire?" Bane replies," Yes, the fire rises," and the follower smiles in the acceptance of imminent death. This type of behavior suggests that Bane's power is not simply physical—his awesome size and strength—but also psychic—his ability to command total loyalty. The film establishes him as a villain even more formidable than the Joker (Heath Ledger) from *The Dark Knight* (2008), who engages followers through fear and promise of payment.[14]

Nolan encourages the spectator to see Bane as the film's primary villain in order to make clear where the real threat lies today. Bane can outwit the CIA and overpower the Gotham police (and even, for some time, Batman), but he has no independent aims of his own. The opening sequence shows his power, but it seduces us with the image of power. The power behind Bane, the one directing his actions, is where our fear should be directed. We wrongly fear the image of terror when we should fear the apparently benign champion of civilizational balance.[15]

Despite Bain's dominance of the mise-en-scène in *Dark Knight Rises*, he is not the film's villain. He serves Miranda Tate (Marion Cotillard), the head of an ecological organization and also secret daughter of Ra's Al Ghul (Liam Neeson), the former head of the League of Shadows. Though Ra's Al Ghul trained Bruce Wayne, Bruce broke from him over his desire to destroy Gotham and ultimately killed him during the assault on the city by the League of Shadows. In *Dark Knight Rises*, Tate seeks vengeance for her father's death and to complete his mission—destroying Gotham in order, as she puts it, to restore balance to civilization.

Bane's attack on the stock exchange bankrupts Bruce Wayne and forces him to give control of Wayne Enterprises—along with its fusion reactor—over to Miranda Tate. She uses the weaponized version of the reactor as the key to her plan for destroying Gotham. In contrast to Bane, however, Tate seems like a progressive figure. Though she is wealthy, she holds a charity ball not to entertain but to provide genuinely for charity, as she tells Bruce when he confronts her about such events. She tells him,

> "You have to invest if you want to restore balance in the world."

Though at this point the film hasn't revealed that she is the daughter of the head of the League of Shadows, she nonetheless speaks like he does, albeit in a disguised form.

Tate's two identities—head of an ecological organization and adherent to the League of Shadows—seem completely at odds with each other. The one is bent on sustainability and the other is bent on destruction. And yet, there is a profound symmetry that becomes apparent through Tate's comment to Bruce at the ball. In other words, Tate hides her true intentions in the only viable hiding place—in plain sight. The League of Shadows destroys not for the sake of destruction—it does not operate out of some perverted understanding of the Freudian death drive—but rather for the sake of balance and harmony. When a civilization becomes too decadent, the League of Shadows intervenes to destroy part of it and restore equilibrium to the world. In the same way, many ecologists, though they don't use destructive methods, argue for a harmonious relationship with the natural world. [16]

The acts of revolution are ultimately in service of the restoration of balance in the world, a balance that is thoroughly ideological.

The idea finds its most pronounced articulation with the Gaia Hypothesis. The primary proponent of Gaia, James Lovelock, envisions a harmonious partnership of all living things. He writes,

> "if Gaia does exist, then we may find ourselves and all other living things to be parts and partners of a vast being who in her entirety has the power to maintain our planet as a fit and comfortable habitat for life."[17]

Though most ecologists don't go so far as Lovelock, the idea of a natural harmony or balance plays a large part in much ecological struggle. Human excess—too much carbon emission, too much population, too much industrial development—has destroyed the balance of the natural order, so the ecological thesis often goes. Even when ecological groups become violent, they can still hold to the thesis that the natural order has a harmonious balance. In fact, this is the perfect justification for an act of violence that would restore the order that humanity has disrupted.[18] In this sense, there is a profound homology between Miranda Tate's overt identification and her covert aims, between ecology and the League of Shadows, and the depiction of this homology represents a high point in the film.[19]

The daughter of Ra's Al Ghul, whom Batman killed in *Batman Begins*, returns for vengeance in *Dark Knight Rises*. He continues to haunt Batman despite his death.
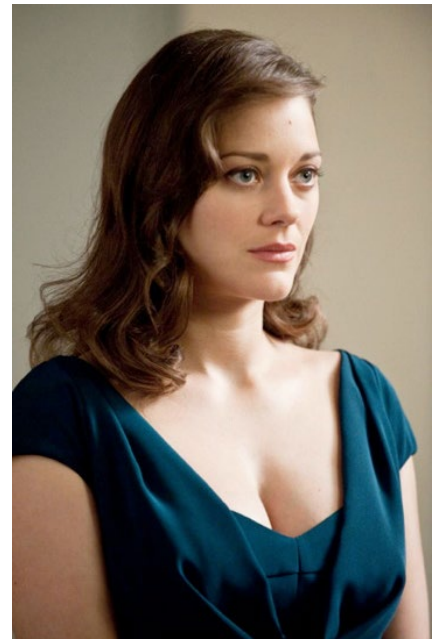
Miranda Tate is the head of an ecological organization. But as the daughter of Ra's Al Ghu, she's the force behind the destructiveness of Bane.

As *Dark Knight Rises* presents it, the chief danger isn't the overt violence of Bane but the vision of balance perpetuated by Tate and her father. The idea of balance is an expression of ideology: it posits a world without the excess of subjectivity or a world in which one might correct that excess. Balance is the great danger, and it requires an investment in the mask to confront it. Ironically, the vehicle through which Tate would accomplish the restoration of balance is a figure of excess, and this excess functions as a site of revelation in the film.

Go to page 2

The truth of the voice

Bane dominates every scene in which he appears. Tom Hardy's appearance and acting reveal his irresistible power.

Though Bane is physically strong, his power actually resides in his voice. The voice is detached from the body as an object that reveals the repressed.

Bane's voice is the hero of the film. It speaks the truth that can't be said and functions as the source of his power.

Even though Bane is not an authentic revolutionary or even the film's central antagonist, he is nonetheless a compelling villain. His attractiveness derives from his effect on other characters in the film—the devotion he inspires—and from his physical presence within the image. Nolan films Bane in a way that accentuates Tom Hardy's oversized and muscled body. He physically dominates all characters in the scenes where he appears. When he kills someone, he does so effortlessly, like when he steps on the throat of a federal agent or snaps the neck of Dr. Pavel (Alon Aboutboul) at the football game. No other character, not even Batman, seems to be able to coexist with Bane on the screen without appearing both physically and psychically small in comparison.

Bane's dominance finds its perfect expression in his voice. If Alfred is the film's true villain, then Bane's voice is its genuine hero. Due to the mask that he must wear because of damage to his face, Bane's voice undergoes a distortion when he speaks. The fictionality of the mask is the source of Bane's power. As he tells a CIA agent at the beginning of the film,

> "No one cared who I was before I put on the mask."

The power of the mask manifests itself in a vocal distortion. This distortion separates Bane's voice from his body, and this separation constitutes the voice itself as an object. Bane terrifies and attracts us through this voice as much as through his physical presence.

In his *Seminar XIII: L'objet de la psychanalyse*, Jacques Lacan explains the voice as one of the lost objects—what he calls versions of the objet a— that function as sites of the subject's enjoyment and thus arouse desire. As Lacan puts it,

> "If the subject's desire is founded in the desire of the Other, this desire as such manifests itself at the level of the voice. The voice is not only the object-cause but also the instrument where the desire of the Other manifests itself."[20] [open endnotes in new window]

This desire of the Other appearing in the voice arouses the subject's own desire. Even though the subject hears the voice, the voice transcends the field of the audible through its association with the Other's mode of enjoyment. This is why it has a profound effect on the subject, as the voice of Bane clearly shows.[21]

The voice appears in what exceeds signification in a statement. It is the object form of the subject's enjoyment, the enjoyment that drives the subject to speak and that the subject derives from speaking. As such, the voice, like the other forms of the lost object, is the site of the truth of the subject. The voice reveals how the subject's form of enjoyment that escapes even the subject's own self-knowledge. Even though spoken by the subject,

Jacques Lacan describes the voice as one of the versions of the objet a, objects that organize our desire through their irreducibility to the field of signification.
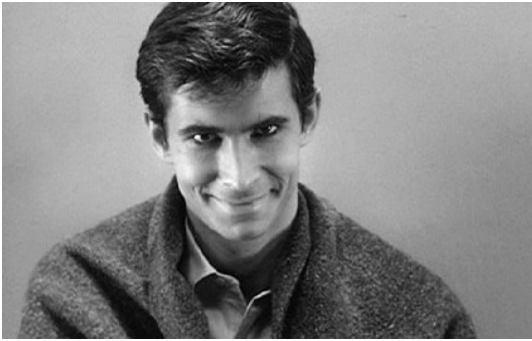
At the end of *Psycho*, the detached voice finally becomes linked to a body, though the voice and body still fail to match, which creates the sense of the uncanny.

James Gordon lies about Harvey Dent's heroism. But Bane's voice brings this repressed truth to light.

the voice is a foreign intruder that accompanies the subject's words, a detached object that reveals that the subject can't know about itself.

The great theorist conceptualizing the voice as an object in the cinema is Michel Chion, who notices how the voice can become disconnected from a body. This disconnection, as Chion sees it, arouses the spectator's desire for the body to whom the voice belongs.[22] The paradigmatic case is Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960): we hear the mother's voice but don't see it linked to her body, and then at the end of the film, we witness its traumatic connection to the wrong body, that of her son Norman (Anthony Perkins). Though Bane's voice is *Dark Knight Rises* seems removed from Bane's body (in part through the mask that he wears), it does not arouse desire. We don't seek the place where the voice belongs. Rather than indicating a lack, it bombards the spectator with an excess. Bane's voice testifies, in other words, to overt presence of his enjoyment, to the passion with which he makes every announcement. This is why his followers are so ready to sacrifice themselves for him.

This voice—voice as an excessive object—is the vehicle for truth in the film. Bane's voice is the return of the repressed, and thus one of its primary targets is Harvey Dent (Aaron Eckhart). Dent is the signifier of repression in *Dark Knight Rises*. His name preserves an ideal of justice even though at the end of his life he transformed into the murderous criminal Two-Face. With the elevation of Harvey Dent into a heroic figure, Gotham and James Gordon perpetuate a fundamental lie. Harvey Dent Day and the Dent Act have their genesis in the lie that Batman killed Dent and committed the murders that Dent actually committed in the previous film. The city of Gotham celebrates Harvey Dent Day to honor the ideal that he represents, and the Dent Act enables extreme judiciary measures for the police to keep certain criminals jailed when they would otherwise be entitled to release. In these two concrete senses, Harvey Dent is the marker of repression, the repression that concludes the previous Batman film and that opens *Dark Knight Rises*.

Dark Knight Rises begins with James Gordon speaking publicly on Harvey Dent Day. Gordon praises Dent by repeating the lie of his heroism. This allows Nolan to display through a crosscutting sequence the role that Bane will have in relation to the signifier "Harvey Dent." As Gordon repeats the lie and praises Dent, the film cuts to Dr. Pavel and other hooded prisoners being taken aboard a CIA plane for transport to the United States. One of the prisoners is Bane, and he stages his own rescue along with the kidnapping of Pavel, who has knowledge of how to weaponize the fusion reactor developed by Wayne Enterprises.

The crosscutting from the ceremony honoring Dent to Bane's heroic escape from the CIA establishes visually the connection between the two characters. The sequence ends with the mayor of Gotham (Nestor Carbonell) praising the virtues of the Dent Act and arguing against those who would repeal it. The intervening shots of Bane's heroic actions reveal the hollowness of these remarks and the ultimate inefficacy of the Dent Act. Against someone such as Bane, the Dent Act would be completely useless.

At this point, the mayor then introduces Gordon to speak further about Dent. In his prepared remarks, Gordon writes the truth, that Dent was a murderer who would have killed Gordon's own son without the intervention of the now-vilified Batman. At the last moment, however,

Nolan crosscuts between Bane's dramatic escape and Gordon's lie. This makes evident the link that exists between Bane and the repression that governs Gotham.

Even the voice of the young boy becomes haunting when Nolan depicts it without any musical accompaniment. Bane's voice echoes through the boy's.

Bane easily defeats Batman the first time that they battle. He spent years in the darkness of prison and thus is immune to Batman's trickery.

The shattered mask of Batman at the conclusion of the first battle indicates that Batman must take up a new identity in order to defeat Bane. He must cease to confront Bane from the position of mastery.

Gordon decides against lifting the repression and instead repeats the lie of Dent's heroism. But he does not destroy the written text of his speech, and it ends up in Bane's hands after the latter's followers capture Gordon.

After he obtains the undelivered speech, Bane reads the text aloud to the people of Gotham and exposes the lie of Harvey Dent. Before freeing the prisoners from Blackgate, he announces publicly,

> "You have been supplied with a false idol to stop you from tearing down this corrupt city. Let me tell you the truth about Harvey Dent from the words of Gotham's police commissioner, James Gordon: 'The Batman didn't murder Harvey Dent, he saved my boy then took the blame for Harvey's appalling crime so that I could, to my shame, build a lie around this fallen idol. I praised the mad man who tried to murder my own child, but I can no longer live with my lie. It is time to trust the people of Gotham with the truth, and it is time for me to resign.' And do you accept this man's resignation? Do you accept the resignation of all these liars? Of all the corrupt?"

What Bane says here is important and gives the lie to the apotheosis of Harvey Dent, but it is Bane's voice that communicates the truth of the indictment. The voice that emanates from the mask refuses repression.

This revelation has a dramatic effect on social authority, which is always constituted on deceit. After he hears Bane's statement, Detective Blake (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) confronts Police Commissioner Gordon about his involvement with the cover-up of Dent's crimes. Gordon defends himself by claiming that Batman dirtied his hands so that Gordon could keep his hands clean, to which Blake replies,

> "Your hands look plenty dirty to me, commissioner."

Though up to this point in the film Blake has viewed Gordon as an ideal to follow, he immediately loses faith in him. His loss of faith in a trusted figure of authority stems directly from the power of Bane's voice.

This voice exposes the lie behind the state of exception (the Dent Act) that Gordon has used to rid Gotham of crime. Gotham is a peaceful city at the beginning of *Dark Knight Rises* solely through the success of the Dent Act, a law that suspends the normal functioning of the juridical order. As Giorgio Agamben points out,

> "The state of exception is not a special kind of law (like the law of war); rather, insofar as it is a suspension of the juridical order itself, it defines law's threshold or limit concept."[24]

The existence of the exception—and Bane's act of pointing it out—threatens the law because it exposes the violent basis of the juridical order. The mastery inherent in this order requires an absolute silence concerning this violence. Bane's voice as an object is the reverse side of mastery and constantly undermines mastery's illusory authority.

But just before Bane's revelation, the film depicts the voice in another form. As Bane prepares to collapse much of the infrastructure of Gotham (including the professional football field), we hear a young boy on the field

singing the "Star Spangled Banner" without any musical accompaniment. The child's voice should be a representation of innocence, but its presence in the film and juxtaposition with the voice of Bane gives it a threatening quality. The child's voice approaches the quality of Bane's because it portends the danger that we know rapidly approaches. Nolan highlights the eeriness of the voice by emphasizing the silence that surrounds it. In addition to the absence of instruments playing, the huge crowd is completely silent and not singing along. This scene shows the voice as an excessive object, just as Bane's voice is, and this excessive object marks a disturbance within the social structure, even when it is singing the anthem that defines that structure.

Bane's voice is the synecdoche of his character. Though he credits the mask with his power, the distortion in the voice that the mask creates is what grants him such disruptiveness.[25] He is a figure of pure voice, and as long as he remains so, Batman cannot defeat him. When Batman finally confronts Bane midway through the film, he does in the sewer system, which functions as a form of Bane's home turf. Because Bane spent much of his life in the dark of a prison, Batman's use of darkness and deception have no effect on him. Unlike Batman, Bane fights with nothing to lose and thus is able to defeat Batman handily. Defeated and unmasked, this leads to Bruce's condemnation to the prison where Bane himself spent many years. Bane sentences Bruce to this prison so that he can helplessly watch as Bane destroys Gotham with Bruce's own nuclear device.
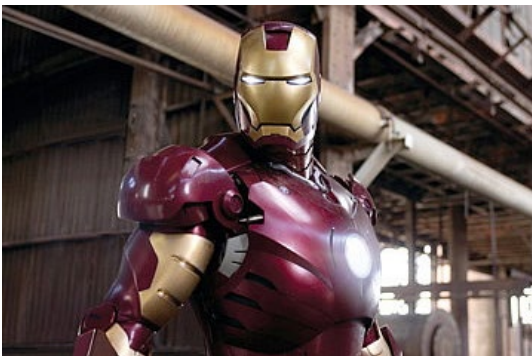
From master to slave

One of the severe limitations of the superhero as a figure of revolution is his or her class status. Though some superheroes have a clearly demarcated middle class status (like Superman working as a journalist, Daredevil as an attorney, or Spider-Man as a photographer), most have enough wealth to create the gadgets that their superheroic feats require. This is the case with both Iron Man and Batman, who live a life of opulence when not working to save civilization. At the very least, the superhero must have the leisure time necessary for crime fighting activity, a leisure time not associated with the working class (though always granted to the superhero's nemesis as well, which is why the villain's plan rarely involves just stealing money).

The superhero, like Iron Man, is often wealthy, or at least has enough income to ensure the leisure time necessary for crime fighting.

This limitation would not be decisive if it did not manifest itself in the acts of the superhero. Like the western heroes on whom they are implicitly modeled, superheroes inevitably act alone. They are incapable of leading or participating in a collective action. In the superhero film, collectivity is usually the province of the villain rather than the superhero, as is the case with *Dark Knight Rises*, where Bane has Gotham's underclass and newly freed criminals working by his side.

This limitation of the superhero comes to a head in *Dark Knight Rises*. The film casts Batman as the defender of class privilege. While Bane threatens to topple the entrenched class structure of Gotham, Batman works to sustain it. His initial defense of the people of Gotham is just an attempt to sustain the status quo. But Batman himself undergoes a fundamental change as the full extent of the threat becomes apparent.

Alfred's departure from Wayne Manor is the first step toward Batman's changed status. Not only does Alfred's role as a servant attest to Bruce's position as a mastery, but Alfred constantly addresses as "Master Wayne."[26] When Alfred reveals that he destroyed Rachel's final letter to

When Bane attacks the city, he has the underclass working with him. This gives him an advantage over Batman.

Batman can only save the city. He cannot lead an emancipatory struggle.

Alfred reveals his deception to Bruce, that he destroyed Rachel's letter proclaiming her love for Harvey Dent.

Bane's attack on the stock exchange reduces Bruce to one of the people and deprives him of his immense wealth. This is the beginning of the end of his mastery.

Bruce proclaiming her love for Harvey Dent rather than Bruce, this precipitates a break and necessitates Alfred's departure. After we see Bruce say "Goodbye Alfred," the film cuts directly to an image of Bruce sleeping in his bed while the doorbell rings. When Bruce finally answers the door, Lucius Fox expresses surprise at this fact. Bruce now has to perform the tasks of everyday life that were formerly done for him. He has ceased to be "Master Wayne." But the loss of his servant is only the beginning of the transformation for Bruce.

Bane's attack on the stock exchange has the effect of defrauding Bruce of all his millions. He is left without the immense resources that had been at his disposal, and he even loses his seat on the company board. As he walks out of the board meeting, a reporter asks him, "How does it feel to be one of the people, Mr. Wayne?" Bruce doesn't respond, but it is clear from the look on his face that he recognizes a change in his class position.

Batman's status as a master does not simply derive from his wealth or the fact that Alfred constantly refers to him using this appellation. He is a master in the Hegelian sense of the term as well, and this version of mastery erects a barrier between himself and the people he saves. In the struggle to the death with the other, the master asserts mastery through the refusal to relent, even if this refusal entails death. The slave, on the other hand, agrees to submission and servitude in order to avoid the horror of death. Though Hegel briefly celebrates the master's courage in risking life for the sake of pure prestige, he quickly recognizes that the truth of the struggle exists on the side of the relenting slave rather than the courageous master.

In one of the most poetic passages in all of his writing, Hegel describes the transformation that the slave undergoes through the fear of death, a fear that the master does not experience. He writes,

> "[The slave] does in fact contain within itself this truth of pure negativity and being-for-self, for it has experienced this its own essential nature. For this consciousness has been fearful, not of this or that particular thing or at odd moments, but its whole being has been seized with dread; for it has experienced the fear of death, the absolute Lord. In that experience in has been quite unmanned, has trembled in every fibre of its being, and everything solid and stable has been shaken to its foundations. But this pure universal movement, the absolute melting-away of everything stable, is the simple, essential nature of self-consciousness, absolute negativity, *pure being-for-self*, which consequently is *implicit* in this consciousness."[27]

The master's bravery allows for the avoidance of the absolute negativity that defines subjectivity, which is what the slave experiences at the moment prior to capitulation. Without this negativity, one remains tied to what one is and remains incapable of any act of transcendence.[28] The problem with Batman as a hero lies in his failure to experience the absolute negativity of the slave. He is a superhero of mastery who neither fears death nor takes life.

But in order to become a superhero capable of countering the false revolution that Bane leads, Batman must abandon his position of mastery. And ironically, it is Bane's punishment of Batman that enables this transformation. The key scene in *Dark Knight Rises* shows the evisceration of Batman's mastery. After defeating Batman in hand-to-hand combat, Bane condemns him to the prison where he spent his childhood.

The horror of the prison, as Bane explains to Batman, does not consist in the impossibility of escape but rather in the hope that it provides for its inhabitants. The entrance to the prison is a deep well that seems to offer an opportunity for prisoners to escape. There is no true despair without the accompaniment of hope, which is why Bane spares Batman instant death and why he condemns him to this particular prison (where Bane himself was once a prisoner).[29] It is the insistence on hope that also leads Bane and Tate to delay the destruction of Gotham with the nuclear bomb. Destruction without the possibility of escaping it, however remote, cannot produce the most devastating despair.

In this way, *Dark Knight Rises* also implicitly explains the bizarre behavior of filmic villains who establish elaborate deaths for heroes rather than simply shooting them in the head. Perhaps the most famous instance of this dynamic occurs in Guy Hamilton's *Goldfinger* (1964), where Goldfinger's laser that would slowly slice the captured James Bond (Sean Connery) in half offers Bond the opportunity to escape. Why does Goldfinger do it? Because the inclusion of hope, even if it provides a margin for escape, also enhances the despair of the hero and thus the enjoyment of the villain.

In *Dark Knight Rises*, we see prisoners attempt to scale the wall that leads from the prison to freedom, and in each case they fail, though Bruce hears from a fellow prisoner that one young child did escape. He strengthens himself in the prison and on two occasions tries to make the climb. But in each case, he fails at the same point near the top and falls with the rope around his waist saving his life. According to his friend in the prison, it is precisely Bruce's mastery, his privilege, that ensures his failure. This contrasts him with the child who escaped. The friend claims that the successful escapee was "a child forged in suffering, hardened by pain, not a man from privilege." Here, the fellow prisoner offers an explicit critique of the limitations of the superhero as such. Batman's mastery induces a reflexive conservatism.

But another prisoner, a blind man, provides a possible solution, the opportunity for Bruce to transform himself from a master into a slave. In a remarkable dialogue from the film, this prisoner articulates the freedom that comes from, as Hegel puts it, trembling in every fiber of one's being. The exchange begins with the prisoner's critique of Bruce:

> Blind Prisoner: You do not fear death. You think this makes you strong. It makes you weak.
> Bruce: Why?
> Blind Prisoner: How can you move faster than possible, fight longer than possible, without the most powerful impulse of the spirit: the fear of death.
> Bruce: I do fear death. I fear dying in here, while my city burns, and there's no one there to save it.
> Blind Prisoner: Then make the climb.
> Bruce: How?
> Blind Prisoner: As the child did, without the rope. Then fear will

Hegel's most famous discussion is that of the struggle between the master and the slave. He saw that though the slave submits, the slave is the ultimate winner because only the slave experiences absolute negativity through fear of death.

While ensconced in Wayne Manor with his servant, Bruce remains a master, and as a master, he remained too invested in the prevailing situation to defeat Bane.

By imprisoning Bruce in the prison where he spent many years, Bane frees Bruce from his position as master. During his escape, Bruce experiences the absolute negativity of the servant.

The prison offers prisoners hope for escape through its opening to the outside world, but this hope exists to ensure a most complete despair.

When Bruce attempts to escape the prison with a rope to save his life, he fails because he does not experience the absolute negativity of the dread of death.

Bruce finally escapes when he abandons the rope and jumps to freedom without any safety

find you again.

Nolan cuts from this exchange to Bruce attempting the climb for the third time, and the absolute fear that he experiences enables him to succeed.

Though Bane intends Bruce's imprisonment to teach him the horror of total despair, what he fails to realize—and what the film shows—is that total despair or pure negativity is the form of subjectivity. The subject becomes a subject when it experiences this emptiness in the face of death, which is why Rebecca Comay, in her stunning book on Hegel, claims that for the subject

"the void is constitutive."[30]

The despair of Bruce's punishment allows him to succeed against Bane because he no longer has an attachment to his prestige as a master. Mastery doesn't fear death, but it does fear the loss of its prestige. It is thus, even more than servitude, a fundamentally limited position, despite its lack of awareness of these limitations.

When Batman returns to Gotham as a slave rather than as a master, he is able to defeat Bane by damaging his mask during a fight. The mask that distorts Bane's voice is the key to his truth as a character. During Batman's final fight with Bane (after Batman's escape from prison), he damages Bane's mask and thereby alters the voice. This is the moment that Nolan uses to reveal the true identity of Tate as the daughter of Ra's Al Ghul and Bane's total allegiance to her. In addition to changing his appearance and voice, Bane's mask saves him from excruciating pain. Thus, with his mask broken and the distortion of his voice eliminated, Bane loses his ability to defeat Batman physically. Bane's power resides not in his physical stature but in the distortion of his voice, a distortion that brings with it the return of the repressed.

But as Bane's relationship to Tate becomes evident, his radicality also disappears. Even though Bane has been doing the bidding of Tate throughout the film (unbeknownst to Batman or the spectator), his voice has functioned independently. His actions were part of a plot, but his voice had a drive of its own. When he loses the voice as separate object, he also loses all independence as a character. As Tate's follower, he is nothing but an instrument that would try to restore balance in the world, whereas his voice represents the impossibility of any balance. Though she feared him throughout the film, Selina Kyle (Anne Hathaway) is able to kill Bane almost nonchalantly after Batman breaks his mask. Without the voice, Bane is reduced to an ordinary criminal in the service of Tate and the League of Shadows.

At this point in the film, Batman changes as well. His defeat of Bane, unlike his defeat of Ra's and the Joker in the earlier films, involves the creation of creation of a collectivity. He needs the assistance of the police, the orphan Blake, and the jewel thief Kyle in order to thwart the plans of Bane and Tate. This form of collectivity brings together legal and marginal forces to defeat the champions of harmony and balance (Bane and Tate).[31]

net. This is the way that Miranda Tate had earlier escaped.

Through this ending, *Dark Knight Rises* glimpses an emancipatory collective, but the film cannot realize it without, in the last instance, exiling Batman from the collective. He must separate himself at the end of the film, expressing a need for individuation that is the superhero's original sin. By opting for this ending, the film misses the radical possibility that it suggests in Bruce's relationship to Selina Kyle.

The keys to the revolutionary kingdom

The Dark Knight rises only when Batman returns to Gotham after his imprisonment as a different kind of superhero, one no longer tied to mastery.

Batman is able to defeat Bane when he escapes from the prison. Because Batman is no longer a master, he no longer fears Bane.

Without his mask and his distorted voice, Selina Kyle is able to kill Bane easily, despite her lack of gadgetry or super strength.

On two occasions in *Dark Knight Rises*, Bruce trusts someone with a revolutionary technological device. These are the first occasions in the trilogy when Batman has trusted anyone outside his circle of intimates. Even when he hoped that Harvey Dent would constitute a licit version of himself, he never offered Dent the keys to the Batcycle, as he does with Selina Kyle. He guards his technological gadgets because they are a crucial source of his power and, in the wrong hands, they could do considerable harm. But this caution diminishes with the increased threat in *Dark Knight Rises*.

Each time that Bruce engages in an act of trust, it is with a woman. The first time seems to be the better bet. He gives Miranda Tate control of the fusion reactor developed by Wayne Enterprises. As head of an ecological organization and Bruce's one-time lover, she seems trustworthy. But Bruce's trust in her is wholly misplaced. It leads to her nearly successful attempt to destroy the city of Gotham by using the reactor's core as a nuclear weapon. Later, as Batman is on the verge of defeating Bain, she stabs him with a knife and proclaims her true identity as Ra's Al Ghul's daughter. Though Bruce was wrong to trust her, she gave him every reason to believe that she was worthy of that trust, and the device that he gives her seems to hold great revolutionary hopes.

The promise of the fusion reactor is free energy for Gotham. This would eliminate the monopoly that the wealthy have on energy and create an opportunity for much greater equality. But the problem with such a device is not just its potential, as Bruce fears, for it becoming a weapon. One can also imagine capitalists finding a way to charge for the distribution and consumption of the energy, even if its production had no costs. The allure of free energy, properly controlled, is a capitalist dream, not a revolutionary one. In this sense, Tate's betrayal inheres within the device itself.

In contrast to Miranda Tate, Bruce has little reason to trust Selina Kyle. She is a criminal rather than someone committed to ecological change. She stole the pearl necklace belonging to Bruce's mother from his house safe and later betrayed him to Bane after promising to help him. Nonetheless, Bruce does trust her with this device, and Kyle proves completely trustworthy. While Tate wants to restore a lost sense of balance through destruction, Kyle expresses an egalitarian sensibility.

Throughout the film, Kyle, though a thief, clearly aligns herself with revolution. At a charity ball where she dances with Bruce Wayne, the camera rotates around the dancing couple as they move across the dance floor. But then Kyle moves her mouth close to Bruce's ear, while both the bodily and camera movement stop. She tells him,

> "There's a storm coming, Mr. Wayne. You and your friends better batten down the hatches, because when it hits, you'll all

In order to defeat Bane and Tate, Batman must enlist the help of the others, including the orphan Blake and the criminal Kyle.

Bruce not only has sex with Miranda Tate, he also trusts her with the keys to a fusion reactor, not realizing that she is the daughter of Ra's Al Ghul.

When we first meet Selina Kyle, she is stealing from Bruce Wayne. And yet, at the end of the film, he must trust her in order to defeat Tate and Bane.

Kyle not only steals Bruce's pearl necklace, but she also betrays him to Bane. She nonetheless

going to wonder how you ever thought you could live so large and leave to little for the rest of us."

Though Bruce doesn't respond, the way that Nolan shoots Kyle's statement reveals its efficacy and truthfulness.

The cessation of all movement and the attention to Kyle's mouth signals that this represents a moment where the truth pierces through the overriding symbolic fiction. Here, as with Bane at other times in the film, Kyle's voice becomes detached from her body and functions as an object speaking what all the wealthy attendees of the ball repress. It is almost as if Nolan uses a close-up on Kyle's voice itself. It is this voice that Bruce can trust, even if Kyle's intentions are criminal.

Kyle is desperate to acquire a device that would erase one's entire history and thereby allow one to start over from scratch. She steals Bruce Wayne's fingerprints for the capitalist Daggett (Ben Mendelsohn) in exchange for such a device, but when she gives him the prints, he informs her that no such technology exists. In theory, it would wipe out every computerized record of one's identity and enact a form of symbolic suicide. Though Kyle wants to use this device to escape her life of crime, it nonetheless embodies the spirit of revolution itself.

The symbolic identities that we have sustain prevailing inequalities and relations of production. Only a break from such identity could facilitate a genuine social change. In his plea for revolutionary change, *Theory of the Subject*, Alain Badiou insists on the evacuation of identity as a prerequisite for such change. He proclaims,

> "let us make a tabula rasa of the past."[32]
> [open endnotes in new window]

Only by destroying one's identity can one endure the capacity for risk that revolution requires.

Though the nuclear core that Bruce gives over to Tate has the power to destroy the city of Gotham, the device that he gives to Kyle has a greater power. It offers the possibility of a complete break from the past. It embodies the revolutionary event, a point at which the sedimented identities of the social structure explode and give way to new possibilities.

But *Dark Knight Rises* does not explore the revolutionary potential of the erasure device that Batman gives to Kyle. Though Bruce overcomes his mastery in the prison, he is unable to overcome the idea of an authentic self outside of the mask rather than an authentic self within the mask (like the authentic voice of Bane). This leads him the illusion of a normal life, an illusion that is not even his own but that of Alfred.

Alfred as villain

Throughout the three Nolan Batman films, the figure of Alfred occupies a special place for Batman and for the spectator. Unlike the other characters within the filmic universe, Alfred knows the truth of Batman and, at the same time, cares for him like a surrogate father. His constant reference to Bruce as "Master Wayne" both secures Bruce in a position of mastery and infancy, given the multiple meanings of the term "master." Alfred still looks at Bruce like at a young "Master" who hasn't yet graduated to the title

proves worthy of his trust in the film's conclusion.

Batman provides Selina Kyle with the keys to the Batcycle, and she assists in saving Gotham despite counseling Bruce not to do so.

Nolan uses a close-up of Kyle's voice talking about revolution to reveal his trustworthiness, despite her criminality in the film. Like Bane's, her voice is the site of truth.

Alfred fantasizes that Bruce will free himself from Batman and live a normal life. It is this fantasy of a normal life that is the real trap for Bruce.

"Mister," and yet he remains for Alfred the undisputed master of the house.

Concerning Bruce's enemies, Alfred always offers sage advice. In *The Dark Knight*, he warns Bruce that the Joker is unlike other criminals who have a consequentialist agenda, and in *Dark Knight Rises*, he offers Bruce an honest assessment of his physical readiness to confront Bain. Alfred doesn't simply tell Bruce what he wants to hear, which is what many servants do. Instead, he sees Bruce from the position he wants to be seen, which is what the ego ideal does.

Though Freud never explicitly delineates the distinction between them, the ideal ego and ego ideal play vastly different roles for the subject. In his essay "On Narcissism: An Introduction," he provides the clearest explanation of their effects within the psyche. The ideal ego is, as Freud puts it,

> "the target of self-love which was enjoyed in childhood by the actual ego."[33]

The ideal ego presents the subject with an image of how it wants to see itself, which is why Jacques Lacan relegates this formation to the imaginary register. The power of the ideal ego keeps the subject within the confines of its own ego without any awareness of any outside authority (even if this authority might govern what appears as an ideal).

Just a bit later in his narcissism essay, however, Freud abruptly shifts his terminology. After explaining the ideal ego, he turns to a discussion of the ego ideal without detailing the difference between the two terms. But the association of the ego ideal with the surveillance of the subject that Freud suggests in the essay provides the key to the distinction. While the ideal ego derives from the subject itself and provides an ideal with which it can identify, the ego ideal is associated with social authority, which is why later Freud will place the figure of social authority in the psyche, the superego, in apposition with the ego ideal.[34]

The ego ideal is an external measuring stick located within the psyche, an ideal point from which the subject imagines itself being seen, which is why Freud links this agency to surveillance. As such, it is a manifestation of the law, as Jacques Lacan makes clear in his discussion of it. In his *Seminar I*, Lacan notes,

> "the demand of the *Ichideal* [ego ideal] takes up its place within the totality of demands of the law."[35]

That is to say, the ego ideal is a measuring stick by which we think of ourselves in terms of what the social authority demands of us. The ego ideal may seem like our friend within social authority (while the superego is our enemy), but its attachment to this authority is nonetheless just as strict.

When Alfred leaves Bruce, this creates the possibility for Bruce's break from the position of the master. But the problem is that Alfred never leaves Bruce's psyche. He makes sure of this when he relates the fantasy that he concocted about Bruce during the latter's absence from Gotham. Alfred sentimentally tells Bruce,

> "Remember when you left Gotham? Before all this, before Batman? You were gone seven years. Seven years I waited, hoping that you wouldn't come back. Every year, I took a

Freud conceives the ego ideal as the position that sees us as we want to be seen. This is precisely the position that Alfred occupies for Bruce.

The film reveals that Bruce repaired the autopilot function on the Bat. Thus, we know that his final act was not necessarily a self-sacrifice.

Selina Kyle and the device that she seeks—one that would erase all symbolic identity—is the true alternative that the film does not pursue.

holiday. I went to Florence. There's this cafe, on the banks of the Arno. Every fine evening, I'd sit there and order a Fernet Branca. I had this fantasy that I would look across the tables and I'd see you there, with a wife and maybe a couple of kids. You wouldn't say anything to me, nor me to you. But we'd both know that you'd made it, that you were happy. I never wanted you to come back to Gotham. I always knew there was nothing here for you except pain and tragedy. And I wanted something more for you than that. I still do."

Here, Alfred provides a concise articulation of an ideological fantasy. It is the fantasy of a life without the mask, the fantasy of a true life lived elsewhere.

Though Alfred presents this fantasy as his own, it is in fact Bruce's fantasy. It involves being seen from the exact perspective from which one wants to be seen—that of the ego ideal. As Alfred recounts this fantasy, Nolan cuts to images of the sighting in the café. In the montage sequence that concludes the film, Nolan includes a scene in the café from the fantasy that repeats the fantasy almost exactly. We see the same look from Alfred, though this time Bruce is accompanied by Selina Kyle.

It is tempting to interpret this scene as just Alfred's private fantasy with no diegetic reality. But this would miss the real deceit that Nolan explores here. If the beginning of *Dark Knight Rises* aims to deceive us about the film's true villain in order to show the danger that resides in the ideal of balance, the film's conclusion offers an even more cunning deceit. When we hear that Bruce Wayne repaired the autopilot function on the Bat that he used to fly the nuclear device out to sea and we see the Bat Signal miraculously repaired, we know right away that this implies Batman could have survived the blast by jumping from the aircraft prior to the bomb's detonation.

By showing Bruce living out Alfred's fantasy, Nolan offers the perfect Hollywood resolution. The hero retires with the romantic partner at his side. And yet, here the conventional ending cannot but disappoint because it illustrates the extent to which Bruce has misunderstood the nature of his own subjectivity.[36] His subjectivity does not reside in the identity of Bruce Wayne who has permanently left the Batman's mask behind. It resides in the mask itself, in the truth that appearance allows to emerge. The mask is the truth of the subject because it manifests the past trauma. This is the case for both Batman and Bane in the film: both wear a mask in response to a trauma that has scarred their being irreparably, and the promise of life without the mask, like the promise of life beyond trauma, is an ideological lie. This is the lie that Alfred peddles in the film.

Batman can defeat all villains, even Bane, but he cannot defeat Alfred. When contrasted with the superego, the ego ideal usually gets good press. But the conclusion of *Dark Knight Rises* reveals its treachery. As the ego ideal, Alfred offers Bruce a position from which he can see himself as likeable, and this will allow him to avoid the radical alternative embodied in the device that he gave to Selina Kyle.

The film's final scene is not the scene depicting Alfred's recognition of Bruce and Kyle in the Italian café. Instead, Nolan opts to conclude with

A normal life for Bruce Wayne is the real danger that the film presents. This places him within the fantasy that Alfred proffers for him.

Blake (revealed at the end of the film to have a given name of "Robin") entering into the Batcave and seemingly taking up the role of the superhero. The suggestion here is that Blake will become Robin to Bruce's Batman, the superhero Nightwing, or perhaps even the new Batman.[37] On a purely cynical level, this ending paves the way for a sequel, but it also serves to undermine Bruce's decision to retreat from the mask in the penultimate scene. Most Hollywood films would simply end with the café scene and avoid an additional scene that might detract from the typical fantasy. Blake's discovery of the Batcave could easily have preceded the scene in the Italian café. Nolan's decision to end the film with Blake rather than with the fantasmatic scene of Bruce and Selina reveals just how unsatisfying this fantasy is.

Despite the numerous leftist attacks on *Dark Knight Rises*, perhaps Rush Limbaugh was right to fear its release. Though its creators avowedly adopt a Dickensian moral view of political change and thereby implicitly reject the possibility of genuine revolution, the film nonetheless points to where true radicality lies—in the mask itself and the truths that the mask enables us to utter. And at the same time, it makes evident the psychic barrier that confounds our revolutionary dreams. The problem is not the fantasy of Batman—people believing that they are superheroes or believing that a superhero might save them. No, the problem is Alfred and our investment in his belief that there is someone beyond the mask, that there is another life, a better life, in an Italian café. We can live with the fantasy of Batman, but we can't live with the reality of Bruce Wayne.

Go to Notes page

To top   Print version   JC 54   *Jump Cut* home

Notes

1. Limbaugh's comments generated an almost infinite quantity of mockery from the Left and even some handwringing from conservatives. For instance, leftist commentator Rachel Maddow devoted a segment of her television program to exposing the ludicrousness of Limbaugh's conspiracy theory. Limbaugh himself noted that this statement occasioned more outrage than any of his other controversial claims, inclusive of his description of Georgetown Law student Sandra Fluke as a "slut" and "prostitute" for her testimony on behalf of insurance coverage for contraception. [return to text]

2. The political discussion surrounding *The Dark Knight Rises* after its release surely became muted due to the shooting in Aurora, Colorado on the night of the film's premiere there. James Holmes fatally shot 12 people and wounded numerous others in the movie theater. This event triggered debates about violence in film and about handgun laws but also focused attention away from the political bent of Nolan's new film. Holmes clearly took the Joker, rather than any character from *The Dark Knight Rises* (a film he hadn't yet seen), as his role model. In fact, Holmes is as far removed from Bane as possible: whereas Bane's voice functions as the source of his power, Holmes retreated into complete silence after his mass murder.

3. Karthick RM, "*The Dark Knight Rises* a Fascist?" *Society and Culture* (July 21, 2012):
http://wavesunceasing.wordpress.com/category/
society-and-culture/.
See also Tyler O'Neil, "Dark Knight and Occupy Wall Street: The Humble Rise," *Hillsdale Natural Law Review* (July 21 2012):
http://hillsdalenaturallawreview.com/2012/07/21/
dark-knight-and-occupy-wall-street-the-humble-rise/.

4. In a blog for the *Washington Times*, conservative columnist Eric Golub equates Bane with Occupy Wall Street. The terror that Bane unleashes is akin to that perpetuated by the Occupy protestors, despite the lack of violence in the movement. He writes, "The evil villain is Bane. He rails on about the powerful exploiting the people, and exhorts the people to rise up. They storm the stock exchange. In other words, they 'Occupy Wall Street.'" Eric Golub, "George W. Batman: *The Dark Knight Rises* Against Occupy Wall Street, *The Washington Times* (August 7, 2012):
http://communities.washingtontimes.com/neighborhood/
tygrrrr-express/2012/aug/6/george-w-batman-
dark-knight-rises-against-occupy/.

5. The head of Gotham's *Comité de salut publique* is Dr. Jonathan Crane (Cillian Murphy), one of the chief villains from *Batman Begins* (2005), which underscores the criminality of the revolutionists. With Crane in a position of power, the attack on Gotham cannot be one of emancipation.

6. The same eulogy is used for Spock (Leonard Nimoy) during his funeral in *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* (Nicholas Meyer, 1982). In both cases, it indicates a forthcoming (and unforeseen) resurrection. Perhaps this is because Sydney Carton, who utters these words just before his impending execution in *A Tale of Two Cities*, is a double for Charles Darnay, who lives thanks to Carton's sacrifice. It is as if Darnay suffers, through Carton, a symbolic death and he continues to live in the real, just like Bruce Wayne and Spock.

7. In a discussion of the film, writer Jonathan Nolan claims that *A Tale of Two Cities* functioned as the chief inspiration for the film. He lauds the novel's "harrowing portrait of a relatable recognizable civilization that had completely fallen to pieces." Jonathan Nolan, quoted in Emmanuel Itier, "Brilliant Filmmaking Duo Discusses Batman Trilogy and *The Dark Knight Rises*," *Buzzine* (July 19, 2012): http://www.buzzinefilm.com/interviews/ film-interview-dark-knight-rises-christopher- nolan-jonathan-nolan-07192012.

8. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume I*, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin, 1976), 929.

9. Given the obscure Arab origins of Bane's traumatic imprisonment, the film seems to target the Arab Spring for critique, as much as the French Revolution or Occupy Wall Street. (I am indebted to Anna Kornbluh [University of Illinois, Chicago] for this point.)

10. Andrew Barnaby (University of Vermont), private communication, August 8, 2012.

11. The theoretical insights of the film are neither the product of Nolan's conscious intention nor that of an interpretation that seeks to exemplify certain concepts through cinematic models. Instead, it is act of filmmaking itself—like the dream work—that engages theoretical concerns. In other words, theory inheres in the work of art itself and even paves the way for the spectator's enjoyment of the work, and the task of the critic is simply to bring it to the fore.

12. For an extended discussion of these and other deceptions in Nolan's cinema, see Todd McGowan, *The Fictional Christopher Nolan* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012). A description is available at: http://www.utexas.edu/utpress/books/mcgfic.html.

13. One of the fundamental tenets of existentialism—the extreme situation strips us down to our authentic selves—seems explicitly confirmed by the cinema. The true heroic self of John McClane (Bruce Willis), for instance, comes out when he finds himself isolated amid a high-tech robbery and

hostage situation in John McTiernan's *Die Hard* (1988). Prior to this extreme situation, McClane appears to be a failed father and husband, but the extremity allows him to prove his inner worth (and true love). In this sense, one could imagine *Die Hard* written by Karl Jaspers or Martin Heidegger.

14. Though Bane inspires more loyalty than the Joker, he is also a more compromised villain. Bane is ultimately trying to restore balance to civilization, while the Joker represents the failure of all civilizational balance. For a discussion of the disruption that the Joker occasions, see Todd McGowan, "The Exceptional Darkness of *The Dark Knight*," *Jump Cut* 51 (2009):
http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc51.2009/darkKnightKant/index.html.

15. The illusion that Bane is the film's chief villain is tied to his image. Our attention to image causes us to miss the symbolic structure that the image obscures. Through its emphasis on the misleading image of Bane, the film functions like the early critique that Jacques Lacan makes concerning how the imaginary register obscures the symbolic order, which effectively runs the show. In an exemplary passage from his fourth seminar, he claims,

> "The imaginary relation, which is an essentially alienated, interrupted, slowed, inhibited, and most often inverted relation, profoundly misrecognizes the relationship of speech between the subject and the Other, the big Other."

Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre IV: La relation d'object, 1956-1957*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Seuil, 1994), 12.

16. Though he doesn't imagine the use of a nuclear bomb to wipe out all human life, ecologist Alan Weisman does envision how the earth would fare after the elimination of the human imprint. See Alan Weisman, *The World Without Us* (New York: Picador, 2008).

17. James Lovelock, *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 1.

18. Of course, not all ecologists are like Lovelock and believe in a natural balance. But it is difficult to be a committed ecologist and not harbor the belief that the natural world has an order to it that humanity lacks. This appears to be the position elaborated in James Cameron's *Avatar* (2010), but the film has the virtue of showing nature itself take sides in a struggle and thereby gives the lie to the ecological notion of a natural balance. For more on this reversal in *Avatar*, see Todd McGowan, "Maternity Divided: *Avatar* and the Enjoyment of Nature," *Jump Cut* 52 (2010):
http://www.ejumpcut.org/currentissue/mcGowanAvatar/index.html.

19. The fact that Tate also seeks revenge for the death of her father, Ra's Al Ghul, further associates her with the idea of balance. The partisan of revenge implicitly believes that the act of vengeance will restore the balance lost through some initial loss. By destroying Bruce, Tate hopes to compensate for

the death of her father, but what the avenger fails to recognize is the primacy of loss, that there is no original balance to restore.

20. Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire XIII: L'objet de la psychanalyse, 1965-1966,* unpublished seminar, session of June 1, 1966. []

21. In *Less Than Nothing*, Slavoj Žižek explains the power of the voice through the contrast between gaze and voice as objects. He claims,

> "the scopic object involves a desire addressed to the Other (to show itself, to allow to be seen), while the vocal object involves a desire from the Other (announcing what it wants from me)"

(Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* [New York: Verso, 2012], 701). Lacan famously notes that our desire is the desire of the Other, but this expression is completely ambiguous and must be taken in two different senses. Gaze and voice function as complementary objects associated with the two senses that the term "desire of the Other" has. The gaze is the object that tries to capture the desire of the Other, while the voice is the object of desire imposed on the subject by the Other.

22. Chion theorizes desire and the voice primarily in terms of what is heard offscreen. He says,

> "it is the law of every offscreen voice to create this desire to go and see who's speaking, even if it's the most minor character."

Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*. Trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 141.

23. Though *Dark Knight Rises* makes clear that the Dent Act has helped to rid Gotham of criminality, it also implies that the extraordinary penalties the act authorizes have helped to create a repressive society. To this end, the film offers a criticism of the previous Batman film, *The Dark Knight*, in which Batman's final self-sacrifice and Gordon's lie about the crimes of Harvey Dent led to this legislation. Just as *Dark Knight* opens with a critique of the vigilantism triggered by Batman in *Batman Begins*, *Dark Knight Rises* provides a critique of the new legal regime triggered by Batman in *Dark Knight*. Each sequel includes a critique of its predecessor.

24. Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 4.

25. The closest analogue to Bane in the cinema is Hannibal Lecter (Anthony Hopkins) in *Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991). In that film, Lecter's voice not only terrifies Clarice Starling (Jodi Foster) and simultaneously leads her to the truth, it also coaxes a cellmate to his death.

26. The problem with the servant like Alfred is that he sees the hero as an ordinary person rather than as a hero. His entire mode of treating the hero will thus work to limit the hero's heroism. Taking up a line of thought from Goethe and adding to it, Hegel contends,

> "No man is a hero to his valet; not, however, because the man is not a hero, but because the valet—is a valet, whose dealings are with the man, not as a hero, but as one who eats, drinks, and wears clothes, in general, with his individual wants and fancies."

G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 404.

27. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 117.

28. As Alexandre Kojève points out in his commentary on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, negativity is the break from human animality. He says,

> "Negativity is liberty (the free or liberating action), the possibility that the human has to transcend its nature; it is what is properly human in humanity."

Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*, ed. Raymond Queneau (Paris: Gallimard, 1947), 64.

29. This is a point that Friedrich Nietzsche insists on throughout his work. In *Human, All Too Human*, he says,

> "hope ... is in truth the worst of all evils, because it protracts the torment of men."

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 45.

30. Rebecca Comay, *Mourning Sickness: Hegel and the French Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 125.

31. I owe this point to Adam Cottrel (Georgia State University).

32. Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, trans. Bruno Bosteels (New York: Continuum, 2009), 168. [return to page 3]

33. Sigmund Freud, "On Narcissism: An Introduction," trans. C. M. Baines, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 14 (London: Hogarth, 1957), 94.

34. In *The Ego and the Id*, Freud notes that

> "a differentiation within the ego ... may be called the 'ego ideal' or 'super-ego.'"

Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, trans. Joan Riviere, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 19 (London: Hogarth, 1961), 28.

35. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book I: Freud's Papers on*

Technique, 1953-1954, trans. John Forrester, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: Norton, 1988), 134.

36. When I saw the film on opening day at a cinema in Montréal, a devoted fan in the bathroom after the film screamed as loud as he could, "That fucking sucked!" I imagine this as a response to the film's ending, which revealed Batman as finally losing, albeit to the fantasy of his butler.

37. All of these theories were proffered by fan discussion groups immediately after the film's release, and all represent a refusal of Bruce's fantasmatic retirement to a normal life in which he populates an Italian café.
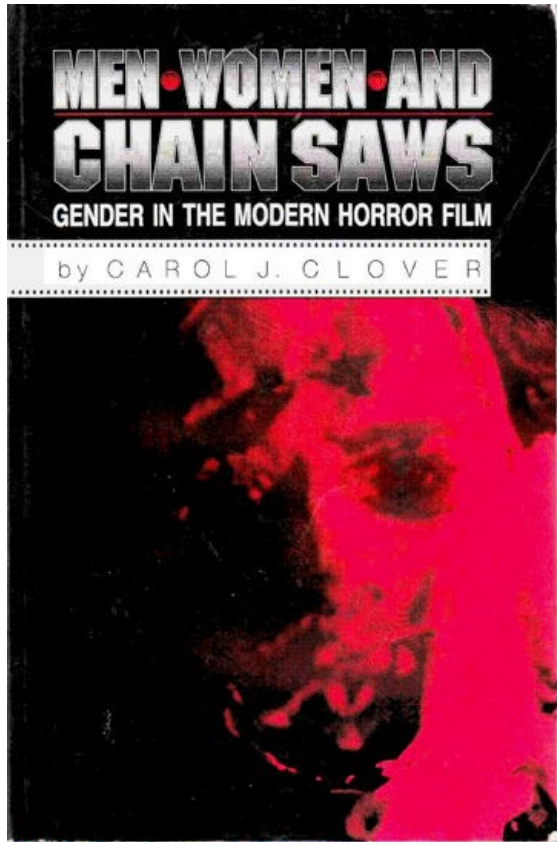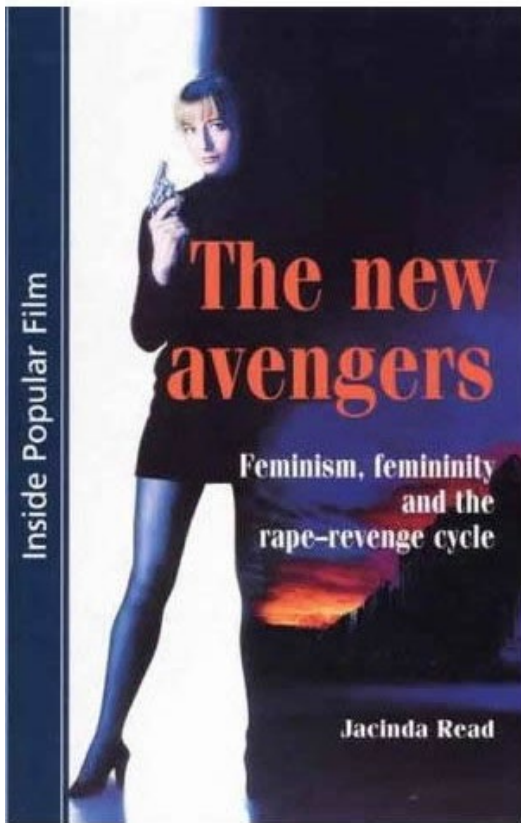

The rape-revenge film: biocultural implications

by David Andrews

In a recent issue of *Philosophy and Literature*,[1] [open endnotes in new window] I argued that film studies could learn from the way in which literary Darwinists have applied evolutionary theory to questions of genre and interpretation in literary studies. At the same time, I noted that film scholars working in this biocultural vein should be careful in developing their rationales, for they can expect criticism from scholars who prefer traditional theoretical regimes.[2] (To be clear, a "biocultural" approach is one that combines biological methods —whether evolutionary, cognitive, or the like—with more traditional humanities methods.) In my view, bioculturalists in film studies will position themselves to deflect such criticism if they focus on areas of inquiry that are *clearly* compatible with evolutionary thinking. And they will further strengthen their position if they can show that the film scholarship in those areas would benefit from an intervention.

The rape-revenge film is one such area. A biocultural approach is relevant at the formal and psychological levels to the analysis of a widespread cinematic narrative structure whose very name conjoins two human behaviors, rape and revenge, that scientific researchers have identified as universal across human history and culture. Given this universality, it is unsurprising that scholars have recently shown that the rape-revenge meme has itself been universal across *film* history and culture. Unfortunately, film scholarship on rape-revenge has made little of that dual universality, in part because recent discussions of rape-revenge in film have been mostly a-theoretical and tentative. Though highly detailed, this scholarship currently offers readers few ways of theorizing the cinematic rape-revenge narrative in a general way.

A biocultural analysis offers a way out of this impasse. By placing these rape-revenge scenarios in the context of current debates in evolutionary psychology, film scholars can gradually begin to re-imagine the logic of this narrative structure. To begin with, a biocultural analysis rooted in Charles Darwin's theory of sexual selection can provide a plausible hypothesis that explains why the pairing of rape and revenge seems so "natural" in this kind of narrative. Such an analysis also offers a potential explanation of how and why rape-revenge movies construct rape as a special crime—and

Carol Clover's study of gender in horror, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*, contains a groundbreaking examination of rape-revenge.

Jacinda Read's revisionary reading of rape-revenge moved this area of study away from psychoanalytic methods.

this inquiry can help illuminate everything from the routine use of flashbacks in rape-revenge to this fictional structure's more recent reliance on torture porn. What is more, this analysis speculates as to why some rape-revenge scenarios, despite their plentiful brutality and nudity, have struck viewers as thematically and politically progressive while others have come across as more exploitative. Before I explore these ideas, however, I want to briefly describe the literature on the rape-revenge movie and establish a *very* basic understanding of sexual-selection theory as it relates to the subjects at hand.

Rape-revenge: the scholarship

Since the early 1990s, the scholarship on the rape-revenge film has been dominated by feminists, including Carol Clover, Barbara Creed, Jacinda Read, Sarah Projansky, and Alexandra Heller-Nicholas.[3] This tradition first gained academic traction through "Getting Even," a chapter of Clover's 1992 book *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*. Here Clover discerned a kind of feminism within 1970s and 1980s rape-revenge films like *I Spit on Your Grave* (Meir Zarchi, 1978) and *Ms. 45* (Abel Ferrara, 1981). Clover also used these films as the basis for her theory of cross-gender identification in horror.

At the end of the decade, in her book *The New Avengers: Feminism, Femininity and the Rape-Revenge Cycle* (2000), Jacinda Read shifted away from Clover's psychoanalytic methods, which were central to many early feminist approaches to the rape-revenge film. Importantly, Read proposed that rape-revenge is not a genre *per se* but is instead a narrative structure mapped across film genres. According to Read, this structure is best understood through its dialectical back-and-forth with second-wave feminism, a movement that was contemporary with the most iconic examples of the form. She critiqued Clover's (and, to a lesser extent, Creed's) psychoanalytic arguments, which did not in her view account sufficiently for historical change. Read also believed that Clover made a mistake in classifying rape-revenge generically as a sub-category of horror.

In her recent book *Rape-Revenge Films: A Critical Study* (2011), Alexandra Heller-Nicholas extends Read's move away from psychoanalysis but also claims that Read committed many of the same errors as Clover. According to Heller-Nicholas, Read had reduced
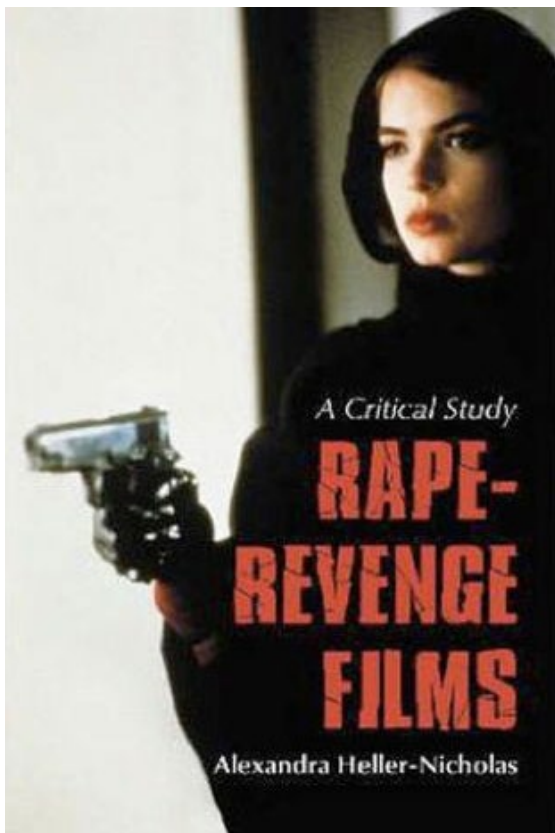
The cover of Alexandra Heller-Nicholas's recent book, *Rape-Revenge Films: A Critical Study*, features an image from *Ms. 45*.
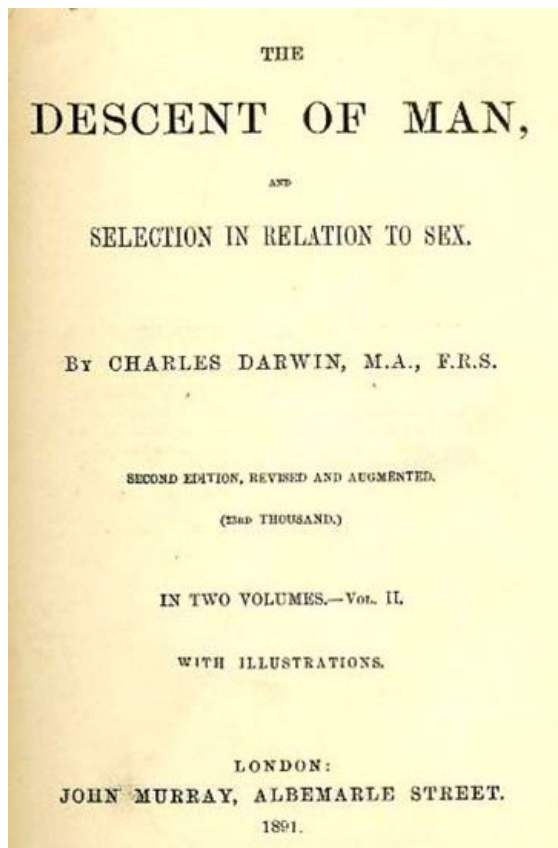
rape-revenge to a handful of feminist- and postfeminist-era films and considered the form all but dead once feminism's second wave had crested. Further, she found Read imprecise in classifying movies that do not even depict *attempted* rape as crucial rape-revenge movies. For her own part, Heller-Nicholas considers rape-revenge a universal phenomenon and points to examples of such films across film history, across high-low culture, and across global film industries. She thinks that Clover and Read were wrong to yoke the form too tightly to the historical period most crucial to second-wave feminism, especially the years between 1975 and 1990. Since the rape-revenge form existed before that time and is exceptionally active today, she finds "no singular or unified treatment of rape across this category when surveyed as a whole."[4]

Heller-Nicholas's work on the universality of rape-revenge as well as the diversity within it is a major contribution to film scholarship—one that is in its own way as crucial as Clover's contribution. It confirms that there is something more persistent and pervasive to the cinematic rape-revenge narrative than its dialogue with second-wave feminism can explain. Unfortunately, because Heller-Nicholas is unwilling to stray too far from feminism's traditional strictures, she seems unsure what to do with her findings and does not come to a satisfying conclusion about the implications of this narrative structure. This is surprising. Unlike Projansky, who once worried that describing rape depictions in academia might fuel the harmful rape discourses so prevalent in the mainstream,[5] Heller-Nicholas casts a wide net in her survey, bluntly examining even the most "idiotic" cases of rape-revenge.[6] Ergo, she shows a willingness to go beyond the limitations that have handicapped other projects. But it is telling that Heller-Nicholas's main reason for looking at such a comprehensive sample of texts is her hope that by doing so she might discover moments of progressive feminist thinking in unexpected places (which, as it happens, she does). Her goal is traditional even if her method is not.

The title page of the second volume of Charles Darwin's *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*.
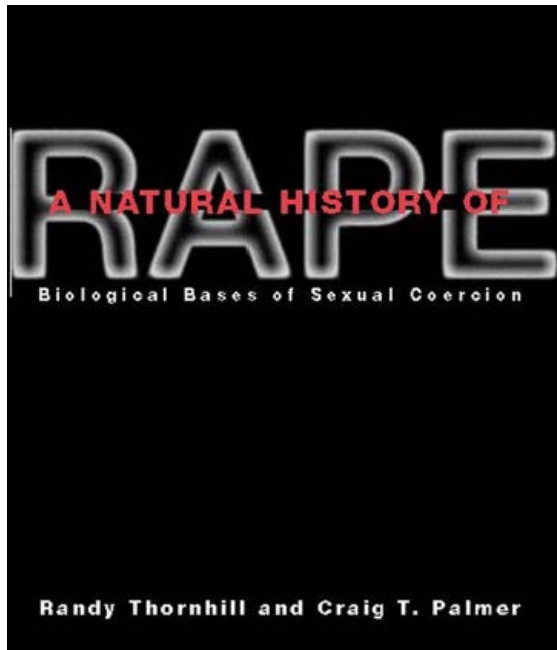
The cover of Randy Thornhill and Craig T. Palmer's controversial book *A Natural History of Rape*.

When in the past film scholars explained rape-revenge through concepts like fetishism or castration anxiety, the problem was not that they were using a universalizing theory—for as Heller-Nicholas has demonstrated, that is what the universality of this narrative structure calls for. The problem was that they were using the *wrong* universalizing theory. It should not surprise us, then, that the biocultural approach usefully replaces one of the ostensible functions of the psychoanalytic approach: it offers rational explanations of the aesthetic structure and psychological appeal of films that often seem primitive in their psychosexual violence. Both psychoanalytic and biocultural approaches perceive the repetitive aspects of the rape-revenge movie as speaking to human instincts and desires that are inarticulate or unconscious. Unlike the psychoanalytic approach, however, the biocultural approach assumes that the appeal of the rape-revenge narrative is rooted in evolutionary drives formed through thousands of generations of Darwinian selection—and this is a subject that is well established in the biological literature. In that respect, the biocultural approach is built on solid foundations that analyze both rape and aggression in a way that can be effectively applied to their depictions in film.

Evolutionary intertwining of rape and revenge

Before re-considering rape-revenge cinema from a more biocultural standpoint, I wish to review the account of rape that is emerging from evolutionary psychology—beginning with a few basic caveats. First, we should dispense with the *naturalistic fallacy*, which has often stopped humanities scholars from pursuing biology-based inquiries. We must recognize at the outset that just because a behavior like rape has evolutionary roots does not mean that it can be considered "good" or "inevitable." Hence, those roots cannot be used to justify the continued presence of rape in our society or any other. What is more, to propose an evolutionary basis for a behavior is not to endorse a kind of *biological determinism*. This issue is of obvious importance to progressive film scholars interested in sex and gender, for a theoretical stance that perceives gender as a set of culturally acquired and perpetuated traits will naturally seem more forward-thinking, or at least more hopeful, than one that appears to close off the potential for social change through biological determinism. But we must keep in mind that this anxiety about biological determinism is rooted in a gross simplification. As Melissa Emery Thompson has observed, although evolutionary explanations have often been "misinterpreted as ascribing biological influence on a behavior to genetically determined inevitability," in fact, evolutionarily

> "derived traits are inherently shaped by the environment of
> the organism, and from the very anatomy of the organism
> to its behavior, the environment is critical in shaping each
> trait during an individual's life."[7]

In practical terms, what this means is that a focus on the *biology* of rape in no sense precludes a focus on the *culture* of rape, which is concomitantly important as we seek to understand how and why heterosexual rape actually happens. Finally, to these disclaimers, we

Not just a classic book, an *epochal* book: Susan Brownmiller's feminist inquiry into rape, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*.

should add one final caveat: the account of heterosexual rape that is now emerging from evolutionary psychology is neither settled nor monolithic. The only thing that does seem to be settled is that the universality of this male sexual behavior across all human cultures suggests that this behavior has evolutionary roots of some kind.

Evolutionary psychology's account of rape in part derives from Darwin's theory of sexual selection. In *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871), Darwin proposed his theory of sexual selection to account for his observation that males and females across many species differ in traits that seem unrelated to differences in either environmental conditions or the basic mechanics of reproduction. For example, males often perform elaborate dances, sing exhausting songs, or display conspicuous ornamentation to attract mates. Sexual-selection theory posits that these biologically male traits evolve because they confer an advantage in competition for access to females; the more baroque males get more matings and therefore leave more offspring than their plainer rivals. If females actively choose the males with the most exaggerated displays, the result is a case of *intersexual selection*, or sexual selection based on *female sexual choice*. If sexual selection is instead based on male-male competition, or *intrasexual selection*, males often evolve weapons with which they can fight other males for access to females.

Biologists have derived many corollaries from Darwin's observations. For example, one major theory in evolutionary biology today posits that males and females across many species "have conflicting reproductive interests that result from fundamental asymmetries in levels of parental investment," a subject that Robert Trivers first theorized in 1972.[8] These differing levels of parental investment (or "parental effort") come from the fact that one parent routinely contributes greater resources to child-rearing. This difference has many implications. As Martin Muller *et al.* have put it,

> "Because in most cases females invest more time and energy in offspring than do males, male reproductive success (1) is limited primarily by access to temporally rare, fecund females and (2) is potentially much higher than that of females. Consequently, males often benefit by being more eager to mate, and less choosy about their mating partners, than are females, *and selection can favor male traits that override female preferences*. The result is an evolutionary arms race between the sexes, in which strategies and counterstrategies are selected to minimize reproductive costs imposed by the opposite sex."[9]

Over the past twenty years, evolutionary psychologists have hypothesized that one of the counter-strategies in this Darwinian "arms race" is rape. Because the males of some species, including several species of primates like humans and orangutans, at times use physical coercion to copulate with females, these researchers have proposed that male-female rape seems to have evolved as a male strategy to overcome the general constraint of *female choosiness*. To be clear, female choosiness is not identical to female sexual agency or to female consent or even to female sexual choice (which, as I have indicated above, is synonymous with intersexual selection, a subject first broached by Darwin).[10] Female choosiness is instead a broader-based sexual trait that contrasts with male reproductive interests across many different species. Those male interests are served by a relative promiscuity that maximizes mate quantity, while female reproductive interests are served by a relative discrimination, or choosiness, maximizing mate quality. Without these differences in reproductive interest and parental effort, sexual coercion and rape would make little evolutionary sense in any species.

Though the rape hypothesis has spurred heated debate both within evolutionary biology and between scientists and feminists,[11] the advocates of the two main positions in evolutionary psychology—described below—both tend to accept the principles of sexual selection, including the general idea that it leads to males that are larger, more aggressive, and more promiscuous in their behavior than females. But these advocates differ on whether rape in *humans* is an evolved tendency of human males—a *rape adaptation* that enhances male fitness—or whether it is just a by-product of male sexuality, that is, an extreme result of a psychology that is relatively aggressive and relatively promiscuous when compared to female psychology. As Randy Thornhill and Craig Palmer put it, rape

> "may be an adaptation that was directly favored by selection because it increased male reproductive success by way of increasing mate number."[12]

Or it may simply be a by-product of the many adaptations that culminated in male promiscuity. Only in the first case would there be a psychological rape mechanism that developed in human males specifically because it provided a "net reproductive benefit," enhancing their fitness through many generations of selection.[13]

But if theorists can't agree on the net benefit of rape to (some) human males, they can agree on its evolutionary costs, especially those that

accrue to female victims. The most direct evolutionary cost to victims comes from the violation of social structures that allow human females to exercise discrimination, or choosiness, through the exercise of agency and consent. Rape victims lose the ability to select males whom they prefer, which in an evolutionary sense robs them of the opportunity to direct the development of their family and to steer its cultural and genetic inheritance. In species other than humans, these deprivations can have dire results, reducing female fitness drastically, and this is no less true for human females, whose social, genetic, and physical standing are threatened by nonconsensual encounters. For example, if a rape victim is already in a relationship, her mate may abandon her, consciously or unconsciously to maintain paternity certainty. This result can devastate the victim and whatever offspring she already has. In a significant number of cases, victims are physically injured in rape; such injuries impact their survival as well as their future reproductive potential. Other effects include psychological traumas and social stigmas. Some of these problems may be indirectly adaptive. If we look in a more complex way at the horrific trauma of rape as a strategy in "the evolutionary arms race between the sexes," we will recognize that rape trauma after the fact—much like the instinctual fear of rape *before* the fact—may actually help women avoid future rapes, just as the cognitive capacity for pain helps people avoid injuries. Speaking broadly, these costs may all be seen as results of male *cheating*, that is, the circumvention of female choosiness in an evolutionary framework in which sexually promiscuous males compete for access to a limited number of fairly discriminating females.

Castration revenge as a prelude to group revenge: this man, recently castrated by his rape victim, is about to be further punished by a group of female soldiers. A scene from Sam Peckinpah's *Cross of Iron*.

Jennifer Hills enduring the second of three rapes in the original *I Spit on Your Grave*.

Experiencing the aftermath of rape at a high-school football game in the *Straw Dogs* remake.

The crucial insight here—that is, the one that is most pertinent to our discussion of rape-revenge—is that the enormous pain of rape is predicted by sexual-selection theory. Because of this pain, female rape victims are predisposed to see rape as a special crime that is on a par with murder. Further, sexual-selection theory suggests why rape is often difficult to prove. For biological as well as cultural reasons, men and women have often had different perspectives on rape.[14] [open endnotes in new window] As Susan Brownmiller noted in *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* (1975) four decades ago, official institutions demand standards of evidence that cannot be met in rape trials, which often devolve into he-said, she-said arguments. Because these standards and the systems of justice they serve often fail rape victims, culminating in the dismissal of charges against rapists, rape is under-reported all over the world, particularly when perpetrated by acquaintances. Furthermore, even when the system *does* work and the rapist or rapists *are* punished, the reporting of a rape is still a risky prospect for the victim, for it might trigger punishments of *her* by her partner, her family, and her social circle. The impulse not to report such a crime is thus exceptionally strong and perhaps represents an evolved tendency. All in all, then, rape is a terrible crime for female victims and one that often goes un-reported to authorities and un-punished by third-party institutions, leaving victims and their allies burdened with outrage or resentment. Consequently, even when they don't seek revenge outside the law, rape victims, their relatives, and their male or female allies may harbor violent vigilante fantasies in which the victim's interests are avenged.[15]

This evolutionary account of rape, though still quite sketchy, dovetails with an emerging account of revenge. Theorists in disciplines from evolutionary psychology to the social sciences are interested in the phenomenon of revenge and how it relates to human traits like moral outrage and physical aggression. The basic assumption across these inquiries is that revenge, in tandem with the outraged behavior that so often accompanies revenge, increases human fitness at the individual and group levels.

According to theorist Tamler Sommers, "retributive behavior is in a certain sense irrational," for it cannot "undo the harm committed by the offense and it often comes with a significant cost" in tow.[16] But this behavior *is* rational in the sense that without the threat of retaliation to keep offenders in check there is nothing to stop people from exploiting one another. In other words, if the cost of retaliating is often high, the cost of not retaliating can also be high. Sommers believes that human evolution solved this problem by developing "mechanisms that motivate us to behave retributively, even when the costs to our self-interests are high." Here, the development of feelings like moralistic aggression, which arose in tandem with resentment and outrage, proved very useful in motivating "violent retaliation against defectors" despite the personal costs. [17] Together, these dispositions formed the basis of the human instinct for revenge as it evolved over the millennia. It is not difficult to see, of course, how these insights apply to rape. If there is a revenge instinct, there is almost certainly a *rape-revenge* instinct, for rape is one of the most fundamental

The trauma of rape: Raquel Welch as a rape victim in *Hannie Caulder*.

A poster for the low-budget rape-revenge western, *The Animals* (a.k.a., *Five Savage Men*).

Discovering evidence of rape in the *Last House on the Left* remake.

human offenses there is.

However, even as the human instinct for revenge solved one of set of problems, it still left the victims of the original offense burdened with personal costs. Not only did they have to suffer the costs of the original offense, they also had to suffer the secondary costs of the retaliation, which could be just as high. To relieve the victim (and other offended parties) of these secondary costs, human cultures gradually moved toward third-party systems wherein civil authorities adjudicated and punished offenders; these systems offered the civic benefit of shouldering the costs of retaliation.

Unfortunately, in the case of rape, the human instinct for a more hands-on approach to revenge has been difficult to sublimate in third-party justice, because this form of justice has so often failed the victim and other offended parties. It is no wonder, then, that film scholars as far back as Clover have observed that, as a narrative structure, rape-revenge has had "a nervous relationship to third-party dispute settlement."[18]

The three key observations emerging from this general overview are, then, as follows. First, as a product of sexual selection, heterosexual rape is a male attempt to circumvent the constraints imposed by the different reproductive interests of the sexes. Whether rape represents a full adaptation, however, is an open question—one that film scholars should definitely *not* presume they know the answer to. Second, evolutionarily, rape has had a high cost for human females and their relatives, who have come to look on it as a special crime. Third, as such a crime, rape is a reliable trigger of the human instinct for revenge, but it is not one that is easily satisfied by cultural institutions. By reading rape-revenge films through this modest Darwinian account, we can tailor a biocultural approach to an area of film studies that needs an intervention. In the next section, I begin this process by demonstrating the different ways in which rape-revenge movies define rape as a special crime, something that is crucial to the appeal of these films.

Communicating the special-ness of rape

> "Motherfucker rapin' me, I don't want to give him a skin rash."
> —*Death Proof* (Quentin Tarantino, 2007)

A rape-revenge film is one whose central narrative maneuver is to use an act of rape, on-screen or off, to motivate an act of vengeance. Or, to twist this just a bit, a rape-revenge film is, as Heller-Nicholas puts it, a movie in which

> "a rape that is central to the narrative is punished by an act of vengeance, either by the victim themselves or by an agent (a lawyer, policeman, or most commonly, a loved one or family member)."[19]

Clearly, the key criterion here is the judgment of *narrative centrality*, which in effect excludes films whose rape-revenge segments do not seem crucial to the way in which the plot plays out. Thus, in this essay, the centrality criterion precludes discussion of films in which the rape-revenge arc is an unambiguously minor element in the film as a whole (see, e.g., Sam Peckinpah's *Cross of Iron* [1977]). It also precludes discussion of trickier cases, in which rape is a minor narrative element but a significant

A rape victim undergoing questioning during her "second rape": a scene from *The Accused*.

An oddly exasperated act of revenge in *Lipstick*.

Jennifer Hills prepares to castrate one of her rapists in the original *I Spit on Your Grave*.

thematic one (e.g., Paul Verhoeven's *Showgirls* [1995]). The rapes avenged in rape-revenge can be male-male (as in John Boorman's *Deliverance* [1972]), male-child (as in Daniel Grou's *Seven Days* [2010]), or female-female (as in any number of women-in-prison films), but the most common type is male-female, or heterosexual. Because this is also the kind of rape whose evolutionary significance is clearest, the discussion below focuses on rape-revenge films in which a heterosexual rape seems to be, in this analyst's judgment, a central narrative element, one that motivates an equally central act of revenge.[20]

In accord with the evolutionary observations note above, these rapes are perceived by the avenger figures in each film as special crimes that deserve equally distinctive acts of vengeance—a dynamic that has contributed to the use of torture-porn imagery in the revenge segments of recent rape-revenge remakes. Though revenge-oriented films often have a regressive or even right-wing slant, the political impetus of the rape-revenge film often seems different, for it is routinely wed to pro-female scenarios that support female sexual agency at the individual level and that usually sympathize with rape victims. Not surprisingly, these ideological sympathies often culminate in a progressive political impact, despite the countervailing obsession of these films with seemingly regressive or excessively voyeuristic elements like nudity, violence, and vigilantism. The exception to this rule is when the avenger figure in the narrative is the husband of the victim or when the rape only loosely motivates the revenge. Both factors are in play, for instance, in the *Straw Dogs* films (Sam Peckinpah, 1971/Rod Lurie, 2011), which have attracted many feminist critiques.[21] Besides the victim's husband, the most common avengers are the victim's parents, the victim's female allies, and of course the victim herself. As I explain in my next section, each type of avenger may be seen as having a distinctive set of evolutionarily-derived motivations for avenging the central rape(s).

Rape-revenge films convey the special-ness of the rape—a special-ness explained and predicted by sexual-selection theory—in several standard ways. Sometimes, they do so by depicting the ferocity and sadism of a rape. This is certainly true of the original *I Spit on Your Grave*, in which Meir Zarchi's heroine is subjected to three separate attacks that take up twenty-five minutes of screen time. During these attacks, the victim is raped vaginally and anally; sodomized with a bottle; subjected to horrifying taunts, shouts, and jeers; and repeatedly punched, kicked, and beaten. Though such violence may not represent the average rape victim's experience of rape, it effectively presents rape as an exceptional crime.

Another way in which the special-ness of rape is constructed cinematically is through glimpses into the mental deterioration of the victim. The logic here is indirect. The films' dramatic response to rape indicates the dramatic nature of the original crime. Character portrayals typically show the victim subject to post-traumatic-stress disorders, often through recurring flashbacks triggered by noise and acts of violence.[22] Today, such depictions are altogether standard, as indicated by the stylistic panache of some recent examples. See, for example, the Friday-night-football sequence in Rod Lurie's remake of *Straw Dogs*. In this sequence, the reverberating traumas of rape are elicited by the pounding hits and the macho crowd noise of high-school football in small-town Mississippi. This sort of representation has obvious feminist resonance. But we should remember that the flashback in rape-revenge was used long before the second-wave critique of rape had even coalesced. Consider, for example, that three films from 1971—including the original *Straw Dogs* film and two

Jennifer Hills demonstrating her power in perhaps the most famous (and exhilarating) shot of the original *I Spit on Your Grave*.

rape-revenge westerns, Ron Joy's *Five Savage Men/The Animals* and Burt Kennedy's *Hannie Caulder*—feature heroines who manifest trauma through uncontrolled flashbacks.

Another common way that these films convey the uniqueness of rape is by placing rape in a comparative context that includes other crimes, like assault and murder. Then the films use the responses of third parties, most often parents, to evoke the unique awfulness of rape. For example, in Dennis Iliadis' remake of *Last House on the Left* (2009), the victim's father (Tony Goldwyn), a surgeon, finds that his daughter (Sara Paxton) has been shot in the back—but he is filled with markedly more horror and revulsion when he subsequently discovers that she has also been raped. Indeed, even when the "other" crime in these films is the ultimate one—murder—the rape can still seem the paramount sin, as it does in the original *Last House on the Left* (Wes Craven, 1972) and in *Eye for an Eye* (John Schlesinger, 1996). Finally, these films also convey rape's specialness by having their scripts directly assert that nothing can atone for rape. This happens, for example, in the remake of *I Spit on Your Grave* (Steven Monroe, 2010), when the victim (Sarah Butler) responds to a heartfelt apology from her rapist (Chad Lindberg) by declaring that when it comes to rape remorse "just isn't good enough." Such assertions in the dialogue indicate that the narrative is set up to accent rape's exceptional nature.

By presenting rape as a special crime, rape-revenge makes the case for punishing this crime in a special way. Such punishment often requires vigilantism. Though rape-revenge often takes the necessity of vigilante action for granted, the narrative may also supply the standard rationale for it: the official legal system is a macho, patriarchal institution that is also prone to "raping" women, meaning that neither rape victims nor their sympathizers can rely on that system for justice. Movies that utilize this rationale begin by depicting an unfeeling police interrogation of the victim—a phenomenon that feminists have dubbed "the second rape"—which leads into a courtroom scene in which the victim is abused by lawyers. In the end, the charges against her rapist are reduced or dismissed by judges and juries. Though exploitation films with feminist aspirations like *Rape Squad* (Bob Kelljan, 1974) and *Lethal Victims* (Raphael Nussbaum, 1987) are the harshest in their critiques of the legal system, even mainstream productions such as *Lipstick* (Lamont Johnson, 1976), *Extremities* (Robert Young, 1986), and *The Accused* have little good to say about this system.

For example, in *Lipstick*, a super-model heroine (Margaux Hemingway) attempts to prosecute her rapist (Chris Sarandon) even though she knows that the tactic is risky. Unfortunately, the jury lets her attacker off, allowing him to rape again—and this time he rapes her sister (Mariel Hemingway). In an exasperated, oddly innocent act of rage, the heroine then opts for a hands-on style of justice. She stalks her rapist and shoots him with a hunting rifle, pumping his body with more bullets than are necessary to kill him. Here the rationale for vigilantism is spelled out against the backdrop of judicial insensitivity and ineffectiveness, which justifies a distinctive act of revenge.[23]

This narrative equation may also be turned around. The special-ness of rape may at the narrative level justify a special act of revenge. But the special-ness of that revenge may also work to reinforce the special-ness of rape, in the process yielding a new awareness of the horror of rape. Perhaps the most iconic, resonant way in which rape-revenge uses a distinctive act of revenge to distinguish rape from other crimes is through

its depiction of castration. In rape-revenge, avengers frequently deprive rapists of their offending organs by biting them off (sometimes after an avenger feigns attraction to a rapist, as in the original version of *Last House on the Left*) or by hacking, sawing, or snipping them off (as in both the original and the remade versions of *I Spit on Your Grave*).

Clearly, castration is an appropriate punishment. Not only is it a properly horrific response to rape, it is also one that keeps the rapist from raping again. But this dramatic loss of sexual and reproductive potential also explains why a castration scene is more horrific to male audiences than a more generic torture scene (one in which a rapist loses some other body part) might be. To castrate a rapist is to avenge one gender-specific trauma through another gender-specific trauma—thus providing audiences, male audiences in particular, an analogue for rape that registers at the gut level (and below).

If castration is the act of revenge best equipped to convey the instinctual horror of rape to male viewers, torture is the act best equipped to convey the feminist idea that rape is power, not sex. The difference is subtle yet significant. The feminist account of rape—which has been argued by many activists, starting with Brownmiller, and which has recently been disputed by evolutionary psychologists like Thornhill and Palmer[24]—stresses that rape requires the non-consensual control of a woman by a man (or men) over a period of time. By this definition, rape is a form of torture, for torture requires the non-consensual control of one person by others over a period of time, during which physical and psychological scars may be left on the victim. If we keep this conceptual overlap in mind, it is possible to read gender-specific implications in rape-revenge's recent turn toward torture-porn in the revenge sections of the remakes of *Last House on the Left* and *I Spit on Your Grave*. My reading of this tendency—one best exemplified by Monroe's remake of the Zarchi original—is that reciprocal cruelty allows an avenger to teach a rapist what it feels like to be raped, thus letting the audience in on the secret as well.
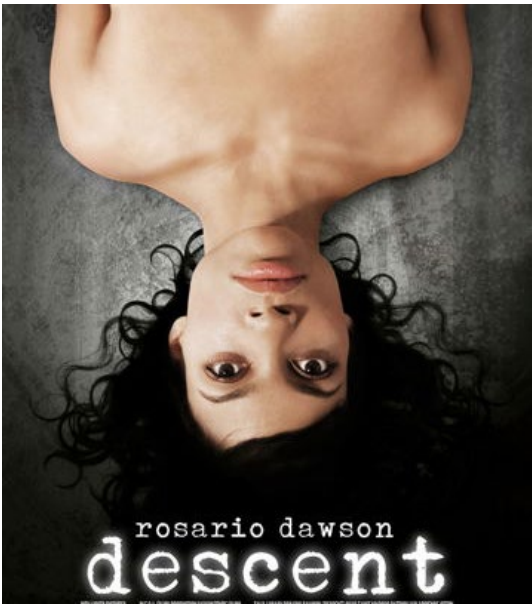
Here we should recall that elements of this motif have long been present in rape-revenge. For example, in the 1986 Farrah Fawcett drama *Extremities,* the heroine traps a man (James Russo) who has twice brutalized her and twice attempted to rape her. She cages him in a fireplace for an extended period, during which time she assaults him and leads him to think that she is either going to kill him or let him die from the bug poison with which she subdued him. Today, rape-revenge dramas continue to dabble with torture; see, for example, the copycat torture-rape in *Descent* (Talia Lugacy, 2007). It seems clear, then, that the torture-porn motifs so noticeable in the aforementioned remakes were not just slapped on the classics as quick ways of making money in a horror industry reshaped by *Saw* (James Wan, 2004) and *Hostel* (Eli Roth, 2005). They are part of the sociohistorical fabric of rape-revenge. And they make biocultural sense, too.

Like most examples of torture-porn, these revenge scenes are extreme. In the remake of *Last House on the Left*, the father of the victim surgically paralyzes his daughter's rapist (Garret Dillahunt), taunts him, and places his head in a microwave, causing it to explode in a money shot reminiscent of *Scanners* (David Cronenberg, 1981). However, because this action is not taken by a survivor, it seems a straightforward act of parental payback, not an attempt to impress the reality of rape on a rapist or an audience. The remake of *I Spit on Your Grave* is more effective in this respect. It transposes the physical and psychological sadism present in the rape scenes onto the revenge scenes, creating a tit-for-tat effect that is intricate and grim. For example, the sheriff (Andrew Howard), who had earlier restrained, taunted, and anally sodomized the rape victim, is shackled in a humiliating posture and sodomized with his own shotgun while being subjected to degrading remarks. The sheriff is finally killed when one of the victim's other attackers inadvertently pulls the trigger of his gun while it is lodged in his anus, blowing off his head and killing a second rapist simultaneously. *I Spit on Your Grave* even combines this feminist accent on power with a castration scene: the victim castrates her main attacker (Jeff Branson) with hedge clippers after torturing him during an extended sequence.

By using castration against rapists, rape-revenge films imply that rape *is* a sexual crime that *can* have sexual motivations—and that it is, further, a crime that can rebound against a rapist's sexual organ. This implication accords with the many recent assertions by evolutionary psychologists that contradict the way in which feminists have looked at rape since the mid-1970s.[25] [open endnotes in new window] For scientists like Thornhill and Palmer, rape is so clearly rooted in male sexual psychology that to present it as non-sexual is simply to deny the evolutionary facts. However, when rape-revenge movies resort to torture in their revenge segments, they typically corroborate the traditional feminist idea that victims experience rape not as sex but as a traumatizing loss of control. Both the newer and the older views of rape conveyed by rape-revenge are clearly correct and shouldn't be treated as mutually exclusive. This is what Darwinian feminists like Griet Vandermassen have emphasized through their revisionary approaches to rape, which indicate how feminist accounts of

Exploitation posters for the two versions of *I Spit on Your Grave*.

Torture-porn imagery in the remake of *I Spit on Your Grave*.

Revenge in a bourgeois space: a scene from the original *Last House on the Left.*

rape might be integrated with biological accounts. For Vandermassen, the key is to focus on power and control, which, in the context of rape, are traditional feminist concerns that now appear to have biological underpinnings as well.[26] What I find interesting is that a culturally debased cinematic structure like rape-revenge can consistently convey this dual truth of rape.

Evolutionary investments in revenge

"You saw it. God, you saw it. The death of an innocent child, and my vengeance. You allowed it to happen. I don't understand you. I don't understand you. Yet still I ask for forgiveness."
—*The Virgin Spring* (Ingmar Bergman, 1960)

Victim-centered rape-revenge films typically have a progressive slant. Indeed, as long as a film like *I Spit on Your Grave* depicts the suffering of a victim and shows her avenging her own exploitation, it can confer a liberal, even feminist slant no matter how much brutality and nudity it envisions along the way. The reason for this is that these victim-centered depictions provide scenes of female empowerment, which in the context of western culture are strongly coded as progressive. But when a movie centers on a different kind of avenger—e.g., the victim's parents, her female allies, or her husband or boyfriend—these values shift. By parsing the selective pressures on these third parties, we can discern why some third-party scenarios seem reliably progressive, while others, like those in which a husband avenges a rape, rarely seem so.

From an evolutionary point of view, a victim and her parents have a similar basis for protecting and avenging female sexual agency. For the victim, this agency gives her a chance to be discriminating in selecting a mate, thus allowing her to steer her offspring's genetic makeup and letting her find a mate who can supply her with resources, especially parental investment. Clearly, these reproductive interests are factors to be protected and, if violated, to be avenged. The parents of a fecund adult female will have a very similar interest in her successful exercise of this choice, for she is in a sense the vehicle of their genes. In other words, if the crime of rape is a direct threat to the victim, it is an indirect threat to her parents, for it threatens the transmission of their genes. It makes sense, then, that rape-revenge films depict parents as profoundly invested in their daughters' sexual agency, such that they feel grief and vengefulness when that agency is violated. Though this investment is instinctive and unconscious, its implications do bubble to the surface now and then. Thus, the mother (Sally Field) in *Eye for an Eye* at one point indicates her belief that her grief is deeper than that of her husband (Ed Harris) because, unlike her, he is not biologically related to the rape victim. Perhaps the most famous movies in this parent-centered tradition are the *Last House on the Left* films, which were inspired by Ingmar Bergman's Swedish art film *The Virgin Spring* (1960), and which in turn inspired many knockoffs (e.g., the grisly *Chaos* [David DeFalco, 2006]).

For the most part, these parent-centered films reinforce traditional family values, not feminist or postfeminist values. They exude this conservative

The parents take their revenge in the remake of *Last House on the Left.*

Eye for an Eye: middle-class values in the context of a mother's instinct for revenge.

bias in many different ways. For example, *The Virgin Spring* constructs an aura of serious religious observance that is tied to family affection and to social cohesion. By contrast, the conservatism of *Last House on the Left* and *Eye for an Eye* is an extension of the clothing and decor of the parents' bourgeois homes. Because the parents in these films are rigorously constructed as "ordinary," viewers come to sympathize with their ordinariness as a function of stories that include rape, murder, and vengeance. The result is a status-quo tone that interferes with whatever radical meaning is attached to scenes in which bourgeois mothers and fathers are violently transformed into the kind of vigilantes that populate progressive, victim-centered films like *Hannie Caulder*, *Ms. 45*, or *Sudden Impact* (Clint Eastwood, 1983). But make no mistake: the radical subtext of these transformations is clearly *there*. This is most apparent, I believe, when a middle-class wife like Karen McCann (Field) comes to resemble an outlaw like Hannie Caulder (Raquel Welch).

That said, the progressive slant of the rape-revenge form is much more consistent and articulate when victims are aided by their female allies. In mainstream vehicles like *Lipstick*, *Extremities*, *The Accused*, and *Thelma and Louise* (Ridley Scott, 1991) as well as in exploitation vehicles like *Rape Squad*, *Lethal Victims*, and *Blood Games* (Tanya Rosenberg, 1990), characters express an open, gendered solidarity with one another even as they bemoan patriarchal systems of justice. Though the evolutionary root of these female alliances is not immediately clear, the scientific literature does offer a number of intriguing hypotheses that we can draw on to make sense of these relationships. Trivers' concept of reciprocal altruism offers one way of understanding how the mutual protection and cooperative forms of vengeance that are depicted in these films might have evolved in the actual world.[27] The female alliances in evidence here also seem to correspond with the speculations of Thornhill and Palmer. Drawing on Barbara Smuts and Sarah Mesnick, these two evolutionary theorists have proposed that alliances of human females "may be explicable as adaptations against male sexual coercion."[28] Indeed, Thornhill and Palmer have gone so far as to suggest that the growth of women's rights since the 1960s has led to a "combination of greater mobility [for females] and less protection by mates and male kin," resulting in "an enhanced risk of sexual coercion." This outcome has only compounded the necessity of "female-female alliances against male coercion [such as those] seen in many other mammalian species."[29] This evolutionary logic offers a way of understanding movies as different as *Rape Squad* and *The Accused*—for in the exploitation rape-revenge vehicle as well as in the more mainstream rape-revenge vehicle, women band together to overcome through social cohesion whatever physical and institutional disadvantages they enjoy *vis-à-vis* men.

Still, as evolutionists have noted, the male-female alliances of heterosexual pair-bonding may also be viewed as a counter-strategy to male coercion. The difference is that in a cinematic narrative, a heterosexual bond between characters is quite likely to connote regressive messaging—not only because it can be tied to the social status quo but because this sort of relationship gains its protective function from biologically male behaviors considered "macho." Male-female bonding may enhance a female's fitness by offering her protection from sexual coercion by undesirable males, but

Female allies highlighted in a poster for *Rape Squad*.

A rape victim and her female ally in *The*

often it only works because it activates mate-guarding tactics and affiliated male traits such as possessiveness, jealousy, and so on. In the context of contemporary culture and its program of women's rights, these traits are coded as patriarchal and reactionary—which means that they are the traits that are often blamed, not endorsed, by the critiques of rape evident in the most progressive-seeming rape-revenge films.

Unsurprisingly, rape-revenge films in which third-party avengers are husbands often seem to *cultivate* regressive attitudes. Here the outstanding case is the *Death Wish* series, in which a husband (Charles Bronson) loses his wife and daughter to thugs who rape, steal, and murder. Though the Bronson character avenges the rapes of his wife and daughter, his vigilante tactics are folded into a critique of a 1970s and 1980s political culture gone soft. These films endorse a tough, law-and-order approach to the crime that is rampant in the *mise-en-scène*. Predictably, the series treats rape as just another crime. This is a long way from the victim-centered approach in which a sense of rape's special-ness is the focus of a more progressive narrative.

The *Straw Dogs* movies take a subtly different slant. In these movies, rape is not folded into a larger context of crime, for there are only a few ambiguous hints in these films that such a context even exists. And because the victim in each version (Susan George, Kate Bosworth) never reports the crimes committed against her, it is difficult to classify these films as rape-revenge. This is not to "blame the victim" or to suggest that it is unrealistic to avoid reporting such crimes. In fact, the failure to report a rape is common, especially when the rape in question is committed by acquaintances, as the rapes are here. (Indeed, as I have suggested, it seems very possible that this unwillingness to report a rape has evolutionary determinants as well as cultural ones.) But it is to say that when a rape in a movie is not reported to an avenger figure, it is difficult to see the film in which these events occur (or don't occur) as a rape-revenge film in the classic sense.

In the *Straw Dogs* movies, Amy Sumner never reports her twin rapes to her husband David (Dustin Hoffman, James Marsden)—and because he is the film's primary avenger-figure, that is, the character who is most responsible for the violence that figures as vengeance, no causal relationship is established between the rape and the revenge. Rapes are depicted in these films, and acts of revenge, too—but the latter do not follow clearly from the former. Especially in the Peckinpah film, it is more likely that David, who taunts Amy during his climactic violence, is to some extent taking his revenge on *Amy* for calling him a coward and for repeatedly questioning his manhood through the film.

In both films, Amy needles David to take a stand against the village

Accused, a movie in which the action of revenge is projected onto a third-party system.

A rape victim and her male ally in *Hannie Caulder*.

Making rape just another crime: the first rape scene in Michael Winner's *Death Wish 2*. (Laurence Fishburne plays one of the rapists in the back.)

A scene of marital friction in the original *Straw Dogs*.

working men who have been encroaching on her body, which she wants him to view as his property. It is as if Amy is goading him into becoming more possessive. In the Peckinpah film, David refuses to take the bait, perhaps because these exchanges are to be interpreted as the last moments of a dying relationship, as the director suggested. In my view, this aspect of Amy's depiction is among the most regressive in the film. The feminist animus directed against Peckinpah's film has focused on the idea that Amy invited her rapes (which I don't see) and on the fact that Amy comes to enjoy parts of the first rape after initially struggling against that rape (which I do).[30] But this critique could be sharpened if it focused on the way in which Peckinpah (and later Lurie) has Amy goad David into becoming more possessive, which is distinctly anti-feminist. David refuses to exercise mate-guarding tactics, as if this role were too primitive for him. [31] Instead, he acts as if he is choosing to engage in violence for entirely abstract reasons: he is defending his house as well as the handicapped man Niles (David Warner), whom he has taken on as a kind of ward. In this way, he proves his masculinity to Amy without giving her what she wants. No part of this picture is happy.

In rape-revenge, when victims seek revenge on their own, they suffuse a film with a progressive aura, for they are promoting female sexual agency and female sexual consent by asserting a female ability to defend and avenge those rights. Other avenger figures also champion female agency and consent, but they often do so less progressively. For example, parental avengers, though motivated by the same evolutionary interests as the victim, often symbolize conservative values. Avengers who qualify as female allies, whose instinctive social cohesion is perhaps explained through reciprocal altruism, articulate a feminist politics and appear progressive in avenging female agency and consent against male coercion. Nevertheless, the necessity of female solidarity implies that women cannot defend and avenge their sexual rights on their own. It makes sense, then, that women also seek protection and vengeance through male partners, activating the mate-guarding tactics that western culture has deemed reactionary.

Conclusion

The rape-revenge film is an area of film studies that is both compatible with biocultural inquiry and that could benefit from such inquiry, given that the scholarship in this area is now at a theoretical impasse. By looking at how the rape-revenge narrative conveys the special-ness of heterosexual rape—an instinctual evaluation of rape that is one of the key predictions of evolutionary psychologists—film scholars can begin to gather new insights into the relationship between rape and revenge, insights that can illuminate everything from this narrative structure's use of rape flashbacks to its more recent use of torture-porn imagery. And by speculating about the instinctual evolutionary impulses driving avenger figures in these films, scholars can begin to understand why certain types of rape-revenge film seem compatible with certain political values and valences.

But the most significant outcome of this new approach to rape-revenge may be that we can use it to integrate the newer, more biological views of rape now favored by many evolutionary psychologists with the older, more traditional views of rape still favored by most feminists. Today, evolutionary psychologists often agree that rape is an alternative mating strategy that emerged through sexual selection, but there is no such

One of the most controversial rape scenes ever: the first rape scene in Sam Peckinpah's *Straw Dogs*.

This is *not* mate-guarding: David Sumner protecting his home in the original *Straw Dogs*.

consensus as to whether rape is an adaptation or whether it is instead a byproduct of an evolved male sexual psychology. In any event, the traditional feminist approach—which holds that rape is more a demonstration of male power than a demonstration of male sexuality—need not be threatened by the emerging science.[32]

We can make this point in a meaningful fashion by reference to the rape-revenge film. Rape-revenge is a violent, often explicit narrative structure that has flourished in the United States film industry since the elimination of the Hollywood Production Code in 1968. It is also an ambivalent form of narrative that feminists have long argued appeals to women as well as men. The secret of this ambivalent appeal may be its dual perspective on rape. Rape-revenge often demonstrates that heterosexual rape is a criminal expression of the male sex drive, but it just as often demonstrates that women experience this crime as a traumatizing loss of power. Recently, rape-revenge, in its typically exploitative way, has suggested this double truth through the use of revenge scenes in which women show their rapists what it feels like to be raped. These scenes indicate that women experience rape as harassment and torture, but not as sex. A biocultural approach to rape-revenge films can help explain this persistent narrative structure by reference to evolutionary differences between the sexes rooted in sexual selection.

Go to Notes page

To top   Print version   JC 54   *Jump Cut* home

Notes

1. David Andrews and Christine Andrews, "Film Studies and the Biocultural Turn," *Philosophy and Literature*, vol. 36, no. 1 (April 2012), pp. 58-78. For an overview of literary Darwinist methods, along with some useful hints concerning how those approaches might be applied to film, see Brian Boyd, Joseph Carroll, and Jonathan Gottschall, eds., *Evolution, Literature, and Film: A Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press), 2010. [return to page 1]

2. I am using "biocultural" in the way that Torben Grodal uses it in *Embodied Visions: Evolution, Emotion, Culture, and Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). Bioculturalists assume that "advances over the past 40 years in our knowledge of the biological functioning of the human brain have led to a convergence" between C.P. Snow's "two cultures." Grodal, *Embodied Visions*, p. 4. For Grodal, it no longer makes sense to develop foundational ideas about cultural products without theorizing the relation between those products and the natural world.

3. There are also many individual articles that address rape-revenge, including a number that have run in *Jump Cut*. See, e.g., Patricia Erens' comments on *I Spit on Your Grave* in "*The Seduction*: The Pornographic Impulse in Slasher Films," *Jump Cut*, no. 32 (April 1987), pp. 53-55. Available at <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC32folder/Seduction.html>. Accessed March 20, 2012.

Using both psychoanalytic and historical arguments to explain the proliferation of pornographic forms in the 1980s, Erens wonders whether the controversy surrounding *I Spit on Your Grave* reflected "the exploitiveness of the rape scenes" or the threat to patriarchal control inherent in "the exhilaration" of female revenge. This question is part of Erens's larger argument: the "demands being made by women as part of their struggle for equality have created a sense of threat for men" that has contributed to the proliferation of the pornographic impulse throughout the contemporary landscape.

For another useful essay in the same issue of *Jump Cut*, see Jake Jakaitis,

"*Giving Way* to Murderous Rage," *Jump Cut*, no. 32 (April 1987), pp. 49-52. Available at <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC32folder/GivingWay.html>. Accessed March 20, 2012.

Finally, a very distinguished early essay on rape-revenge is Peter Lehman's chapter, "'Don't Blame This on a Girl': Female Rape-Revenge Films," in *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*, ed. Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 103-116. Lehman does a particularly good job theorizing male objectification within a subgenre that he refers to as "female rape-revenge films."

4. Alexandra Heller-Nicholas, *Rape-Revenge Films: A Critical Study* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2011), p. 1. For the other texts cited in this summary, see Carol Clover, "Getting Even," *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 114-165; and Jacinda Read, *The New Avengers: Feminism, Femininity, and the Rape-Revenge Cycle* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000).

5. Sarah Projansky, *Watching Rape: Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), pp. 3-11.

6. Heller-Nicholas, *Rape-Revenge Films*, p. 88.

7. Melissa Emery Thompson, "Human Rape: Revising Evolutionary Hypotheses," *Sexual Coercion in Primates and Humans: An Evolutionary Perspective on Male Aggression Against Females*, ed. Martin Muller and Richard Wrangham (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 352.

8. Martin Muller, Sonya Kahlenberg, and Richard Wrangham, "Male Aggression and Sexual Coercion of Females in Primates," *Sexual Coercion in Primates and Humans*, ed. Muller and Wrangham, p. 3.

9. Ibid., p. 4. Italics added.

10. In using the word "choosiness," I am drawing on an extremely broad biological concept that is *not* identical to individual sexual "pickiness." I want be clear about this, because such language could easily give offense, especially in the context of heterosexual rape.

11. The evolutionary roots of rape have been most famously traced by Randy Thornhill and Craig Palmer in *A Natural History of Rape: Biological Bases of Sexual Coercion* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), a book that stirred a great deal of controversy. Thornhill and Palmer have been rebutting critiques from scientists and feminists ever since the publication of this book. For evidence of this debate, see Muller and Wrangham's anthology, *Sexual Coercion in Primates and Humans*, and Griet Vandermassen's article, "Evolution and Rape: A Feminist Darwinian Perspective," *Sex Roles* 64.9-10 (May 2011), pp. 732-747.

12. Thornhill and Palmer, *A Natural History of Rape*, p. 59. Again, while accepting the general idea of rape as an alternative mating strategy, many

evolutionary psychologists think more evidence is required to support the idea that rape represents an adaptation that improves human fitness; see William F. McKibbin, *et al.*, "Why Do Men Rape? An Evolutionary Psychology Perspective," *Review of General Psychology* 12.1 (2008), pp. 86-97. For a strictly ecological, quantitative argument against the idea that rape is adaptive, see Eric Smith, Monique Borgerhoff Mulder, and Kim Hill, "Controversies in the Evolutionary Social Sciences: A Guide for the Perplexed," *Trends in Ecology and Evolution* 16.3 (March 2001), p. 133.

13. Thornhill and Palmer, *A Natural History of Rape*, p. 60. Palmer himself holds this view; so does Donald Symons in *The Evolution of Human Sexuality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); see pp. 283-284.

14. Thornhill and Palmer, *A Natural History of Rape*, pp. 31-52, 85-104. [return to page 2]

15. I believe that a major part of the psychological appeal of rape-revenge lies in the way the form taps into the human capacity for this complex, biologically ingrained fantasy of revenge.

16. Tamler Sommers, "The Two Faces of Revenge: Moral Responsibility and the Culture of Honor," *Biology and Philosophy* 24.1 (2009), p. 37. Evolutionary psychologists who have written insightfully on revenge include Margo Wilson, Martin Daly, Leda Cosmides, and John Tooby.

17. Ibid. Sommers is drawing on the evolutionary theory of Robert Trivers in particular.

18. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*, p. 123.

19. Heller-Nicholas, *Rape-Revenge Films*, p. 3.

20. For economy, this article also focuses on American rape-revenge films from the post-1968-era, a period in which the form had a chance to bear out all the explicitness implicit in the designation "rape-revenge"—explicitness that had been specifically curtailed by the Hollywood Production Code. Nevertheless, as my discussion of Heller-Nicholas suggests, rape-revenge has a much longer and far more international history than this focus implies. Today, numerous trends visible in the American films discussed here are also visible globally. Hence, torture-porn effects are evident in the revenge segments of rape-revenge films from many different film industries, as demonstrated by the highly effective French Canadian movie *Seven Days*.

21. For example, on Peckinpah's *Straw Dogs*, see Molly Haskell's comments in *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies* (1974; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987) or Joan Mellen's comments in *Big Bad Wolves: Masculinity in the American Film* (New York: Pantheon, 1977).

22. Thus, a subset of these movies—e.g., *Demented* (Arthur Jeffreys, 1980), *Ms. 45,* etc.—includes a heroine who is driven to psychosis by rape.

23. As Julia Lesage has observed, such scenes can be satisfying for women viewers, who may experience a vicarious thrill through scenes of vengeance

against male rapists. For more on female rage, see Julia Lesage, "Women's Rage," *Jump Cut*, no. 31 (1985). Available at <http://pages.uoregon.edu/jlesage/ Juliafolder/womensRage.html>. Accessed March 21, 2012. See also Peter Lehman, "'Don't Blame this on a Girl.'"

24. Thornhill and Palmer, *A Natural History of Rape*, pp. 124-128. On torture in the cinema, see Julia Lesage, "Torture Documentaries," *Jump Cut*, no. 51 (Spring 2009). Available at <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc51.2009/ TortureDocumentaries/index.html>. Accessed March 20, 2012.

25. Again, see Thornhill and Palmer, *A Natural History of Rape*, for an extended critique of the post-Brownmiller idea that rape is power, not sex. Feminists in biology, like Barbara Smuts and Sarah Mesnick, do not deny the sexual implications of rape; they do, however, challenge the idea that rape is *only* sexual in its motivations and hence they often highlight issues of sexual control. See Vandermassen, "Evolution and Rape," pp. 732-734, 738-744. (See also note 26.) [return to page 3]

26. Thus, in paraphrasing Smuts, Vandermassen synthesizes a biologically oriented account of why men want power over women: "because they have an evolved desire to control female sexuality and the offspring women produce (in order to ensure paternity)." This "desire to control" can lead to violence and rape. Vandermassen, "Evolution and Rape," p. 738. According to Vandermassen, it is Smuts's stress on the "element of control," something that is not stressed by Thornhill and Palmer, that makes her theory "compatible with traditional feminist accounts of rape." In the torture-porn scenes discussed above, the feminist import of the scenes is evident in their stress on control, not sex.

27. See Robert Trivers, "The Evolution of Reciprocal Altruism," *Quarterly Review of Biology*, vol. 46 (1971), pp. 35-57.

28. Thornhill and Palmer, *A Natural History of Rape*, p. 55; also pp 97, 103. See Barbara Smuts, "Male Aggression Against Women: An Evolutionary Perspective," *Human Nature* 3 (1992), pp. 1-44; Barbara Smuts and Robert Smuts, "Male Aggression and Sexual Coercion of Females in Nonhuman Primates and other Mammals: Evidence and Theoretical Implications," *Advances in the Study of Behavior* 22 (1993), pp. 1-63; and Sarah Mesnick, "Sexual Alliances: Evidence and Evolutionary Implications," *Feminism and Evolutionary Biology: Boundaries, Intersections, and Frontiers*, ed. Patricia Gowaty (New York: Chapman and Hall, 1997), pp. 207-260.

29. Thornhill and Palmer, *A Natural History of Rape*, p. 103. See also Vandermassen, "Evolution and Rape," pp. 738-740.

30. See, e.g., Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape*, pp. 361-364; and Heller-Nicholas, *Rape-Revenge Films*, pp. 45-50.

31. As Margo Wilson and Martin Daly have asserted, "male sexual proprietariness is an evolved motivational/cognitive subsystem of the human brain/mind," one that dictates everything from mate guarding to sexual

jealousy. Margo Wilson and Martin Daly, "Coercive Violence by Human Males against their Female Partners," *Sexual Coercion in Primates and Humans*, ed. Muller and Wrangham, p. 275. See Vandermassen, "Evolution and Rape," pp. 740-741.

32. For evidence, see Vandermassen, "Evolution and Rape," pp. 738-741.

Images from *Beau travail*

Beau travail is set largely in Djibouti at a French Foreign Legion outpost in the Horn of Africa.

On her childhood spent travelling through colonial Africa, Denis has said, "I remember being dazzled by the beauty of the Red Sea, the desert. You don't forget a landscape like that. I always thought of Djibouti as a place where human history hasn't really begun yet – or perhaps it's already over..." (Romney, 2000)

Feeling and form in the films of Claire Denis

by Ian Murphy

> "If cinema does not give us the presence of the body and cannot give it to us, this is perhaps also because it sets itself a different objective: it spreads an "experimental night" or a white space over us; it works with 'dancing seeds' and a 'luminous dust'; it affects the visible with a fundamental disturbance, and the world with a suspension, that contradicts all natural perception. What it produces in this way is the genesis of an unknown body."
> – Gilles Deleuze [1][open endnotes in new window]

The features, shorts and documentaries of French filmmaker Claire Denis represent one of the more curious riddles of contemporary cinema. Her career-long experimentation with genre forms has made her work a study in extremes, yet it is difficult to chart a decisive authorial relationship between each of the odd, elliptical statements she has issued over the past two decades. Consider the variation in theme and tone that makes uneasy bedfellows of the dreamy sibling-relationship drama *Nénette et Boni* (1996) and the gruesome sex-cannibal horror *Trouble Every Day* (2001), or of the free-form Möbius strip of *L'intrus* (2004) and her recent melodrama on the legacies of postcolonialism, *White Material* (2009). [2] In the absence of a clear generic pattern, critics have fastened onto those broad stylistic trademarks that cement her work in auteur territory. The unofficial repertory company of actors recycled from one film to the next, including (but not limited to) Alex Descas, Michel Subor, Grégoire Colin, Isaach De Bankolé and Béatrice Dalle. The trusted base of long-term technical collaborators, such as cinematographer Agnès Godard, editor Nelly Quettier, sound designer Jean-Louis Ughetto, and composers Dickon Hinchliffe and Stuart Staples of the British band Tindersticks. [3] The minimal dialogue, free-form approach to narrative, and tendency to punctuate certain scenes with an incongruous but cannily chosen pop song (think of the Beach Boys' "God Only Knows" in *Nénette et Boni* or The Commodores' "Nightshift" in *35 Shots of Rum* (2008). Still the films refuse to yield up their secrets, to be known with certainty.

The willful eclecticism that makes Denis' body of work consistently interesting also makes it difficult to situate within any definitive

The film's deserts, cliffs and seascapes, though exotically beautiful, are rendered with fluid, dispassionate austerity.

Beau travail demonstrates Denis' preference for Antonioni-esque still frames in which the human figure often takes secondary importance to empty spaces, inanimate objects, and natural or industrial environments.

The legionnaires spend their days in a hermetically sealed-off universe, staging ludicrous training rituals without an empire to conquer or enemy to attack.

theoretical contexts. In some respects, it seems that her spiritual lineage lies less with the French New Wave filmmakers whose flame burned brightly during her formative years than with what Paul Schrader has termed the transcendental style of international filmmakers like Ozu, Bresson and Antonioni. [4] We can, to some extent, trace her subversion of classical modes of spectatorship back to those directors' predilection for long takes, minimal dialogue, and the repetition of still or "empty" frames in which the human figure is frequently edged off the screen, replaced by an alienating focus on depopulated spaces, inanimate objects, and natural or industrial environments. In Denis' case, though, wide-angle compositions in which figures are inscribed as one object among others in the frame, dwarfed Antonioni-style by their surrounding landscapes, are alternated with isolating and fragmentary close-ups of those same bodies filling the frame. The effect of these tight close-ups can be warmly sensuous as in *Nénette et Boni* or claustrophobic and menacing as in *Trouble Every Day*, but the principle remains the same. Human flesh seems trapped under a microscope, framed so close that the viewer acquires a vivid sense of its texture, weight and movement in space, but simultaneously it is denied any corresponding axis of perspective, depth or location in the film's overall scenographic space.

The emphasis on the lived experience of the human body means that Denis' cinema can be only partially located within the transcendental aesthetic, which for Schrader is less concerned with subjectivity and finally depends on a quality of epiphany bursting through the minor key of everyday "stasis." In her incisive book-length study of Denis' career, Martine Beugnet helpfully reads Denis' focus on sensation, movement and physicality in terms of Gilles Deleuze's influential philosophy of time-image cinema, in which time is set free from the causal framework of traditional narrative to "become the actual texture of the film." [5] Indeed, the gaps in narrative space that characterize Denis' approach to storytelling are self-consciously Deleuzian. Bypassing such frivolities as exposition and psychology, the screenplays she writes with regular collaborator Jean-Pol Fargeau are jagged and nonlinear, built around a series of structured ellipses that betray a perverse disregard for the laws of time, space and logic that govern traditional narrative. Denis has spoken at length about this process, which she and Fargeau initiate by writing "full" story drafts to establish the specific relationships between characters, incidents and timelines. The finished-looking script, however, is only used as a private blueprint for the collaborators. At that stage the real work begins, with successive layers of text stripped away until the story feels sufficiently "musical." [6]

The notion of a "musical" approach to film narrative is significant for this article. Beugnet states that, once they are "freed from their functions as mere links in a chain of causes and effects, images are thus offered up to contemplation and observation." [7] If images are

These rituals are invariably performed under the blazing desert sun, with acres of youthful male flesh expressing the Legion's homoerotic tensions and fascistic ideals of masculinity.

The soldiers' movements during the rituals constitute a highly choreographed rhythmic space between martial arts, yoga and dance.

The paternalistic love triangle at the film's centre unfolds as a relay of sub-hysterical gazes between our protagonist, the tortured Sergeant Galoup (Denis Lavant) …

cut loose from the implicitly understood laws of narrative cinema, they inevitably inhabit a different role in relation to the other elements of a film – editing, camera movement, score, sound design. In the case of Denis' cinema, I contend that the images assume a purely sensual and symbolic relation to these other elements, whereby they only carry meaning as part of a complex whole. When the viewer's relation to the image is opened up, subjected to interrogation in a manner not possible in traditional narrative cinema, it also has meaningful implications for the senses of hearing and touch – faculties that cinema typically considers ancillary to the unifying stability and coherence of vision.

I draw upon the aesthetics of philosopher Susanne Langer and 'haptic' cinema theorist Laura U. Marks to argue that, in privileging tactile and auditory modes of spectatorship, Denis creates a rhythmic form whose material structure is closer to music than the language of narrative cinema. This in turn facilitates a deeper engagement with the memories, perceptions and intuitions that make up the viewer's inner life, what Langer calls "the verbally ineffable and therefore unknown forms of sentience." [8] While the argument could be extended to a number of Denis' films, I agree with Beugnet that 1999's dizzying postcolonial fable *Beau travail* and 2002's low-key romance *Vendredi soir* remain

> "the most accomplished examples of a filmmaking that privileges the visual and the rhythmic (that is, the way the images are edited together but also the structure of the soundtrack, ambient or musical) over scripted dialogue and plot." [9]

To this I would add that while Denis' cinema of feeling and form can demand a new type of psychic engagement from viewers, it can also reward them with a deeper connection to the self, to "the genesis of an unknown body." [10]

Beau travail—the listening eye

> "Cinema is not made to give a psychological explanation. For me, cinema is montage, editing. To make blocks of impressions or emotions meet another block of impressions or emotions, and put in between pieces of explanation, to me it's boring… Our brains are full of literature – my brain is. But I think we also have a dream world, the brain is also full of images and songs, and I think that making films for me is to get rid of explanation." – Claire Denis [11]

Beau travail is Claire Denis' idiosyncratic take on the narrative laid out in Herman Melville's 1924 novella *Billy Budd* and the 1951 Benjamin Britten opera of the same name. Far from a direct adaptation, Denis' film is an impressionistic, free-form reconstitution of the more mythic and allegorical elements of the story, which concerns the homoerotic battle of good and evil that arises when a saintly young seaman is accused of conspiracy to mutiny by his ship's malevolent Master-at-

... Sentain (Grégoire Colin), the innocent object of his jealous rage…

… and Forestier (Michel Subor), the mysterious platoon commandant who lords over the whole flock.

The gaze is fundamental in establishing Galoup's erotically charged hatred for Sentain during this martial arts exercise.

Arms, John Claggart. One fundamental change in Denis' version is that this psychic war has been transplanted from the HMS Bellipotent of Melville's text to the French Foreign Legion, where a regiment of soldiers has been stationed indefinitely in the Northeast African outpost of Djibouti. The film thus unfolds within the ravaged narrative context of postcolonialism where, without an empire to conquer or enemy to attack, the soldiers spend their days in an hermetically sealed-off universe, perfecting ritualistic daily routines, consorting with local women, and performing endless training exercises under the white-hot sun.

Another key difference in Denis' adaptation is that our protagonist is no longer the saintly Billy Budd type but the villainous Claggart figure, here named Galoup and recast as a tortured sergeant major (Denis Lavant) who feels "something vague and menacing take hold"with the arrival into his fold of new recruit Sentain (Colin). Innocent, heroic and beautiful, Sentain's seeming perfection drives Galoup into a state of barely suppressed rage that encompasses both lust and jealousy, especially when Sentain wins the paternalistic favor of platoon commandant Bruno Forestier (Subor). "There must be a chip in Sentain's armor,"Galoup tells us in tense voiceover narration. "We all have a trashcan deep within."

As usual for Denis and Fargeau, the script of *Beau travail* is a bare skeleton. Long stretches of spooky silence are punctuated by a handful of verbal sentiments, most of which shed so little light on characters' rationale or emotional life that they feel willfully unhelpful. This is partly because the band of youthful legionnaires at its center purposely lacks personality: they are nameless, featureless, and almost comical in their male-model beauty and inertia, an amorphous mass who have sublimated any notion of selfhood to the greater calling of national identity and the futile postcolonial project of the Legion. Yet the tone of withholding and estrangement also extends to those landscapes that Denis was dazzled by as a child. [12] The deserts, cliffs and seascapes of Djibouti may be wildly beautiful, but Agnès Godard's camera pans across them with a crystalline depth of field that suggests not exotic rapture but the kind of fluid, dispassionate austerity that marked the primitive island scenery of Antonioni's *L'avventura* (1960). Furthermore, as if to cement the film's status as visualist critique of Western male expansionist myth, *Beau travail* is intimately concerned with issues of the gaze.

The homosocial environment of the Legion, humid with psychic repression and fascistic ideals of masculinity, lends itself naturally to an intertextual dialogue that incorporates the transgressive mythologies of Melville and Britten, but also Jean Genet and a lineage of filmmakers ranging from Fassbinder to Jarman, Eisenstein to Riefenstahl. [13] As such its narrative allows ample space for exposed male flesh and hysterical gazing behavior. Galoup, wolfish and pug-nosed, watches Sentain with the overheated resentment of a Biblical misfit; Sentain looks back, blameless and bemused; Forestier watches over both men with a leer at once sinister and jaded. There are martial arts exercises so absurdly homoerotic that the gaze becomes foreplay to a hate fuck that never happens: Galoup and Sentain circle each

Their glowering eye contact and spatial opposition as they predatorily circle each other inscribes the scene as a tongue-in-cheek queer pastiche of the climactic showdown in *Once Upon a Time in the West*.

Martine Beugnet notes that this long asynchronous shot of the legionnaires walking across a lunar desert landscape from right to left contradicts our traditional sense of movement in time, in the process frustrating our optical engagement with the film-as-narrative.

other like predators on the beach, their eye contact stealthy and ferocious as Britten's opera booms over their silliness. [14] The more charged the gazes grow, the less they tell us about anything.

Perhaps that is because Denis' cinema does not equate visualism with knowledge. Nor does it privilege sight as the primary faculty of human understanding. Sight in her films is always unstable, lacking integrity. That alone makes it necessary for her to abandon that filmic system built around the visual faculty at the expense of all others: the classical narrative. Within this system, the foundations of backstory, causation, and human psychology find their form in the invisible alchemy of the continuity edit. As theorized by the likes of David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, continuity operates by orchestrating an artificial syntax between establishing shots, POV shots, eyeline matches and shot-reverse shots to create the illusion of pictorial depth and, with it, a coherent narrative space. In doing so it proposes merely to follow

> "the 'natural attention' of the spectator. First the onlooker surveys the scene (establishing shot); as the action continues, he or she focuses upon a detail (cut-in), or glances back and forth at the participants in a conversation (shot/reverse shot), or glances to the side when distracted by a sound or motion (cutaway)." [15]

The classical shot cannot be understood outside of its essential discursive function, a chain of cause and effect that sutures the viewer into a diegetic perspective and stimulates a psychic response. It achieves this by co-opting the viewer's whole sensory field into the unifying structure of vision. If we take each shot as a single unit of meaning, we may understand the classical narrative as a style that attempts to unfold like a language, with visual utterances assuming the fixed status of what Susanne Langer terms "conventional reference" [16] when they are ordered in a recognizable spatio-temporal sequence. As Langer sees it,

> "Language in the strict sense is essentially discursive; it has permanent units of meaning which are combinable into larger units; it has fixed equivalences that make definition and translation possible... The meanings given through language are successively understood, and gathered into a whole by the process called discourse." [17]

Go to page 2

The amplification of incidental sound effects, such as the amniotic flapping of legionnaires' flippers in underwater training, is equally important to Denis' construction of a musical rhythm.

As the film progresses, Galoup's psyche is explored more deeply in tactile and aural registers, often through intimate close-ups that emphasize his ears as much as his eyes.


This camera set-up, positioned behind Galoup's head at a traumatically noisy campfire dance, even frames his ears in silhouette.

Adrian Martin has written elsewhere of the visual techniques Denis uses to break classical chains of command, a dense process that includes but extends beyond such French New Wave traditions as disembodied voices on the soundtrack and characters' breaking the fourth wall. [18] [open endnotes in new window]Essentially she demolishes the three-way harmony between scene, camera and editing, breaking up shot linkages in a manner that does violence to the syntax of continuity and the laws of mainstream spectatorship. Martin offers the opening three minutes of Denis' semi-autobiographical 1988 debut film *Chocolat* as evidence, citing the discord between establishing shots that set up spatio-temporal context and usher in the objective illusion, shots of a character looking at an off-screen object that announce the suturing process, and eyeline matches that do not match the expected POV and thus lead us astray. His example is enlightening: a long but relatively conventional opening shot of a quiet beach, followed by another conventional shot of a young white woman gazing across the sand at a black child on the shore, followed by an overhead close-up of the child in the water. This last shot is the one that violates cinema's traditional laws of looking, because it cannot be intended to represent the gazer's distant perspective. And with images desubjectified, divested of certain ownership, classical viewers have both visual identification processes and the spatio-temporal ground torn from beneath their feet.

Martin, Beugnet and others have traced the development of Denis' visual aesthetic in the years since *Chocolat*, identifying the ways in which she has refined her methods of ellipsis and worked out new narrative devices with which to plant seeds of doubt in our minds about the knowledge-value of vision. Certainly there is a distinct sense of a filmmaker who has gradually developed her own mercurial brand of Deleuzian time-image cinema, moving from the relatively accessible use of parallel editing structures in films like *US Go Home* (1994), *J'ai pas sommeil* (1994) and *Nénette et Boni* to the extreme case of a film like *L'intrus*, in which the viewer's attempts to grasp the most fundamental details of narrative incident, chronology or spatial organization are constantly frustrated by the manner in which every scene – indeed, every image – unfolds in an uncertain limbo between flashback, memory and dream.

One of the devices through which Denis attains a state of narrative flux in *Beau travail* is, at least on the surface, a fairly conventional, novelistic one: that of the unreliable narrator. Rather than provide the viewer with a stable point of objective reference, Galoup's voiceover is misleading and impressionistic, frequently dropping off the soundtrack for long stretches before returning with a sticky, close-up murmur to offer an opaque digression or aside that collapses the boundaries between reality and myth, memory and dream. [19] Without other sources to corroborate Galoup's observations or orient us in terms of geography, time zones, or chronology of events, we are never quite sure what to believe. As a result we are forced to trust the hazy impressions gleaned from signifiers like location and costume changes.

Beyond the narration, Beugnet has described how Denis also destabilizes viewer perspective at the level of editing and mise-en-scène, citing among many examples a long asynchronous shot of the legionnaires walking across a lunar desert landscape to the dreamy strain of Neil Young's "Safeway Cart." [20] In this case, the fact that the legionnaires move across the screen from right to left – in effect contradicting our traditional sense of movement in time – is an optical defamiliarization tactic familiar from such films as Stanley Kubrick's *Paths of*
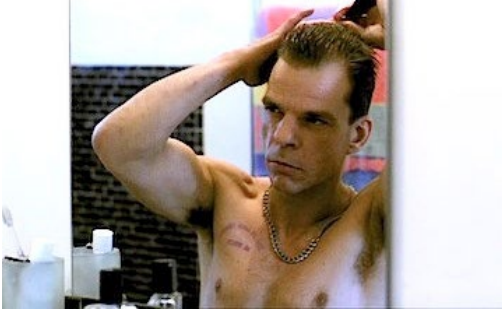
In the film's most unnerving scene, a near-silent itinerary of the sergeant combing his hair and dressing in a bathroom mirror will cut to the deafening underwater explosion of a helicopter.

As Galoup buttons his shirt, his sporadic voiceover narration sutures us into his subjectivity

His gaze into the mirror signals the explosion as the brain-event of a man who has lost all pretense of grid-like Cartesian interfacing with his environment.

Glory (1957) and Agnès Varda's *Vagabond* (1985). The film consistently plays such tricks on our vision to prevent us from accumulating meanings that obey the cause-and-effect psychology of traditional narrative cinema. Long shots and still frames of landscapes cut unexpectedly to close-ups of faces and bodies, with a distressing lack of master shots to smoothen the transitions or even securely localize the spaces of action. Instead, the wildly uneven duration of the shots and the alternation between straight cuts, dissolves and superimpositions conjures up a distinct sense of improvisation at the editing desk – a sense that Denis and Quettier are searching for new ways to riff upon cinematic time and space. More obviously, it causes the film to speed up and slow down in tempo. Taken as a whole, these strategies constitute the development of a strange, almost seasick rhythm, which critic Jonathan Romney picked up on when he compared *Beau travail* to the free-jazz compositions of Charlie Parker and Ornette Coleman. [21] [22] It is rhythm that pulls the film outside the established syntax of traditional narrative and into another realm: music. According to Langer,

> "Music, like language, is an articulate form. Its parts not only fuse together to yield a greater entity, but in doing so they maintain some degree of separate existence, and the sensuous character of each element is affected by its function in the complex whole. This means that the greater entity we call a composition is not merely produced by mixture, like a new color made by mixing paints, but is articulated, i.e. its internal structure is given to our perception." [23]

Of foremost importance to Denis' construction of a musical rhythm, and the articulation of its structure to our perception, is the role of sound. No auditory sensation goes unheard – or unfelt – in the monosyllabic male world of the Foreign Legion. The sparsity of dialogue makes us pay closer attention to everything we do hear.

- The scratchy static of a sweeping brush along the ground.
- The bassy hum of a breeze as the legionnaires walk a precarious high-wire.
- The steam hissing from Galoup's iron as he starches his shirt.
- The whoosh of shaving foam from a can.
- The brushing of a razor upon skin.
- The abrasion of hands, feet and torsos against raw earth as the men wriggle under the barbed wire of an obstacle course.

Aural contrasts register in jarring fashion, like an abrupt cut from bubbly dance music in the local discotheque to the amniotic flapping of legionnaires' flippers in underwater training. *Beau travail* is, to borrow Steven Connor's phrase about another work – Walter Ruttmann's eleven-minute audio recording *Wochenende* (1929) –

> "a sound-film requiring a kind of listening eye, a gaze mutated into the conditions of hearing." [24]

An individual analysis of any one of these sound effects may elicit puzzlement at Denis' decision to mike up ambient or incidental noise higher than is usual in cinema. Taken cumulatively, though, her aural design works in concert with Galoup's trenchant narration to transport the viewer into his ever-darkening brain states. Even more so than her visual subversions, it is this emphasis on aural subjectivity that creates a cinematic rhythm whose import is purely symbolic.

For Langer, music attains the status of "significant form" by virtue of being symbolic rather than discursive. She believes there is a close logical resemblance between its formal structure and the forms of human feeling. What distinguishes music from language is that, rather than being understood successively through chains of "conventional reference," music operates as a complex symbol for the processes of our psyche, a "tonal analogue of emotive life" [25] that is capable of expressing what words cannot. So, too, Denis' narrative project in *Beau travail* gradually reveals itself as an auditory account of her protagonist's mental life, a

psychic limbo where

> "the singular space of the visual is transformed by the experience of sound to a plural space."[26]

Sounds build upon one another to form pictures, providing the internal psychodrama of a man who, blindsided by jealousy, gradually loses all pretense of grid-like Cartesian interfacing with his environment. In turn Denis renounces the temporal continuity and spatio-visual reassurances of the classical narrative. As Steven Connor reminds us,

> "The self defined in terms of hearing rather than sight is a self imaged not as a point, but as a membrane; not as a picture, but as a channel through which voices, noises and music travel."[27]


It is a strikingly potent audiovisual, the blue sea suddenly bursting with an inky red that, in literal terms, could be either blood or fire.
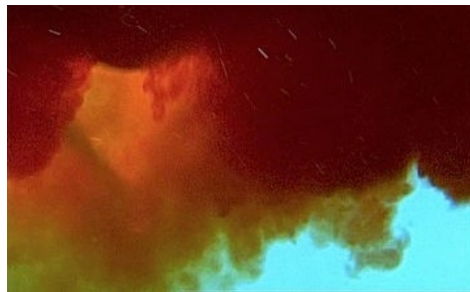
Denis has attuned us so intimately with Galoup's synaptic jitters that the expulsive redness filling the screen could just as easily be an aneurysm popping in close-up.

The red sound-image serves no practical purpose in *Beau travail*'s story-world, operating instead in a purely symbolic realm closer to music than narrative cinema.
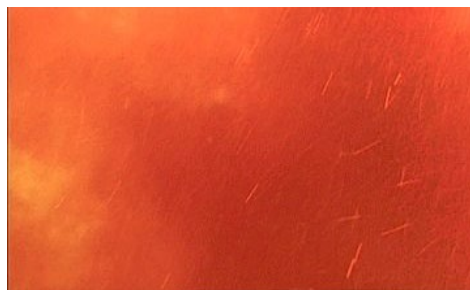
It feels like Galoup's inner epiphany of impending apocalypse: "That day something overpowering took over my heart. I thought about the end. The end of me. The end of Forestier."

His admission that "first we just heard a deafening noise" cues the explosion as a psychic code red, so that even if we are not sure where we stand in the narrative chain of events, it all makes a deeper, more intuitive kind of sense.

Emotions also travel through these channels, and Denis brings troubling emotional undertows to her wall of sound. The human body is an echoing chamber, a site where the seeing-equals-knowing ethos of vision lies exposed as an impotent construct. As one might expect from a director twisting film form into the shape of music, Denis has more faith in hearing as a structuring essence of life, a faculty that is acquired embryonically long before vision and only leaves the body in death after the other senses have shut down. Hence the most unnerving scene in *Beau travail* is not a gaze-related one, but the one that cuts from a near-silent itinerary of the sergeant combing his hair and buttoning his shirt in a bathroom mirror to

The incident marks the turning point in Galoup's life, the moment when he is eternally banished from Forestier's affections because "it was then that Sentain's heroism came to the fore."

Galoup's mysterious, ostensibly sexual assignation with beautiful Djibouti native Rahel (Marta Tafesse Kassa) suggests he is not completely cut off from the plane of touch, but clearly hers is not the touch he craves.

Claustrophobic close-ups of torsos, limbs and palms during the training rituals appear to mock Galoup's bitter longing for tenderness.

the deafening underwater explosion of a helicopter.

This incident marks the turning point in Galoup's life, the moment when he is eternally banished from Forestier's affections because "it was then that Sentain's heroism came to the fore." It is a strikingly potent audiovisual, the blue sea suddenly bursting with an inky red that, in literal terms, could be either blood or fire. Denis has attuned us so intimately to Galoup's synaptic jitters that the expulsive redness filling the screen could just as easily be an aneurysm popping in close-up. The red sound-image serves no practical purpose in the narrative, operating instead in that purely symbolic realm where

> "the factor of significance is not logically discriminated, but is felt as a quality rather than recognized as a function." [28]

It feels like Galoup's inner epiphany of impending apocalypse. He tells us,

> "That day something overpowering took over my heart. I thought about the end. The end of me. The end of Forestier."

His admission that "first we just heard a deafening noise" cues the explosion as a psychic code red, so that even if we are not sure where we stand in the narrative chain of events, it all makes a deeper, more intuitive kind of sense. Life begins with sound. Life ends with sound. The crisis that bifurcates Galoup's life is thus organized in terms of sound.

If sound is the sense whose constant presence defines Galoup's life, touch is the sense whose absence is most painfully felt. Touch functions as the invisible anchor of *Beau travail*, an off-screen vanishing point that charges every cell of the film. Touch is also, obviously, the sense most literally connected to the thematic of desire that haunts all of Denis' films. She seems to be aware that what matters most in desire is the failure to satiate it, for once satiated it can no longer be desire. Galoup's desire is potent precisely because it remains unconsummated. Whether he wants to have sex with Sentain or kill him (or probably both), he never gets to lay a hand on him. Nor is he welcomed back into the paternal bosom of Forestier's affections. Galoup is not completely cut off from the plane of touch, as evidenced by his mysterious, ostensibly sexual assignation with beautiful Djibouti native Rahel (Marta Tafesse Kassa). Clearly, though, hers is not the touch he craves. Thus we may interpret the soundtrack's gradual descent into cacophony as the crumbling sound-world of a man driven mad for want of tactile comfort.

The scene where Sentain is publicly praised by Forestier for his act of courage typifies Denis' rhythmic approach to both tactile sensation and quiet-loud dynamics: Galoup, alone in his room, briefly interrupts his own seething silence to tear off his military shirt and whip it through the air. Other significant collisions of sound and touch have a similarly dark import. When the legionnaires and natives join for a campfire dance, Denis' camera fixes itself on the back of Galoup's head, his large ears outlined in silhouette. His clanging internal racket is attuned to an aural set piece that incorporates the whistling of soldiers, the smashing of glass, the sizzle of firewood, the beating of hands upon wooden drums, and a fist-fight between two men on the sand. At such moments our attention is drawn to the status of rhythm as ancient, patterned movement, a primordial energy whose form is measured in sound and silence. Rhythm is a force that depends not on the unifying primacy of vision, but on a sympathetic correspondence between those senses that predate vision, and this means that it is also, in Langer's words,

> "a kind of symbolism peculiarly adapted to the explication of 'unspeakable' things." [29]

Sound and touch collide in violence as the legionnaires slap against each other's chests in a compromise between an embrace and a wrestling grip.

Decentred compositions like this one emphasize Galoup's loneliness, isolation, and failure to adjust to civilian life in Marseilles.

The film's numerous training rituals, which constitute a rhythmic space between martial arts and dance, offer another case in point. In one, the legionnaires slap against each other's chests in a homoerotic compromise between an embrace and a wrestling grip, their bodies crashing into each other with unfettered violence. Balletic and sculptural in their choreography, these rituals are full of outstretched palms and angled elbows, shot up close as if to mock Galoup's bitter craving for tenderness. There is, halfway through the film, a brief interlude where sound and touch meet in harmony: Sentain, having his head shaved by another soldier, chuckles happily as his comrade dusts the loose stubble off his scalp. But his simple sensual pleasure is undercut by the very next shot, as the self-loathing Galoup loads a fresh magazine into his rifle and gazes ferociously into the camera.

The focus on psychic subjectivity, and the sheer vividness of Denis' rhythmic articulations, ensure that our empathies lie with the spiteful, spurned Galoup rather than the catalytic cipher Sentain – even when the latter, punishingly expelled in the wilderness after Galoup has plotted against him, nearly burns to death on a sun-drenched salt beach. Desire is expressed as an animal state, a condition beyond the grasp of moral judgment or conscious recognition, and a force that refuses to yield to the laws of discourse. It is simply, in Galoup's own words, something overpowering that takes over your heart. In this case, we have no right to expect the discursive properties of language – syntax, grammar, logic – to magically emerge from his voiceover narration:

> "Everybody knows that language is a very poor medium for expressing our emotional nature. It merely names certain vaguely and crudely conceived states, but fails miserably in any attempt to convey the ever-moving patterns, the ambivalences and intricacies of inner experience, the interplay of feelings with thoughts and impressions, memories and echoes of memories, transient fantasy, or its mere runic traces, all turned into nameless, emotional stuff." [30]

Galoup, raw with self-loathing, loads a fresh magazine into his rifle and gazes ferociously into the camera.

The intense focus on Galoup's subjectivity ensures that our empathies lie with him rather than Sentain, even when the latter nearly burns to death on a smoldering salt beach.

Nor should we expect Denis to articulate the problem of desire within the linguistic bounds of traditional narrative cinema. And once narrative has failed us, what remains in life besides bodies in motion? Among many possible readings, *Beau travail*'s much-debated closing scene can be interpreted as a spectacular catharsis of the failure of narrative and the simultaneous persistence of pure feeling. Galoup, now expelled from the Legion himself and failing to adjust to civilian life in Marseilles, lies on a bed with a gun in his hand, ostensibly contemplating suicide. Beside a tattoo of the Legion code on his chest – "Serve the good cause and die" – a vein on his bicep pulses to the tinny beat of Corona's gay house anthem "Rhythm of the Night." Thus we are led into one of the most bizarrely exhilarating closing scenes in modern cinema, another of those episodes that occupy a psychic wasteland between flashback, hallucination, memory and dream: the sergeant alone in a nightclub and dressed in a dandyish black Fred Astaire outfit, which he had earlier worn in Djibouti; his reflection multiplied by a hall of diamond mirrors; fallen from the code of the Legion as from the land of narrative; breakdancing furiously.

This closing dance scene, which feels like the postscript to a musical from another planet, has no individual function within the film's story-world. It is useless to try and reinscribe it within the laws of syntax by constructing a timeline of events, reassessing the spaces of action, or speculating upon location or costume changes. Its relation to what has come before is not discursive but symbolic, and its significance is not of the order of meaning but of vital import. Langer reminds us that music is

Fallen from the code of the Legion as from the land of narrative, Galoup prepares for a solo breakdance in a mirrored nightclub.

> "a highly articulated sensuous object, which by virtue of its dynamic structure can express the forms of vital experience which language is peculiarly unfit to convey. Feeling, life, motion and emotion constitute its import." [31] [open endnotes in new window]

It is useless to try and reinscribe *Beau travail*'s closing scene within the laws of syntax by constructing a timeline of events, reassessing the spaces of action, or speculating upon location or costume changes – its significance is not narrative, but musical.

The torrent of spastic action unleashed by Galoup's whirling, spinning body sensuously evokes the endurance of desire as the great unrepresentable of human language.

Like music, it is only as a complex whole that *Beau travail* makes sense. And more than any narrative considerations, the torrent of spastic action unleashed by Galoup's whirling, spinning body sensuously evokes the endurance of desire as the great unrepresentable of human language. Words fail us, feelings persist, and sometimes we have no choice but to trust our own strange rhythm.

Vendredi soir—the acoustic womb

"We begin to hear before we are born, four-and-a-half months after conception. From then on, we develop in a continuous and luxurious bath of sounds: the song of our mother's voice, the swash of her breathing, the trumpeting of her intestines, the timpani of her heart."
– Walter Murch [32]

With her 2002 film *Vendredi soir*, Claire Denis advanced her journey into the rhythmic landscapes of desire, reaching further towards a cinematic form that seeks to transcend the expressive limitations of words and vision. Upon first inspection, the film seems atypical territory for the director: a two-character romantic drama co-adapted with Emmanuèle Bernheim from the latter's novel about a one-night stand that takes place during a 24-hour public transport strike in Paris. Warm and gentle, the film unfolds in ordered chronological sequence and sustains a disarming minor key throughout. The lightness of its tone and subject matter are far removed from the dazzling subversions of *Beau travail* or *L'intrus*, films where Denis launches a far more direct assault upon cinema's traditional discourses of narrative, form and spectatorship. Despite its favorable critical response upon release, *Vendredi soir* remains one of the less studied works in Denis' canon. In fact it represents her most quietly radical experiment in film form to date.

Reflecting on a mode of vision that first gripped Western thought during the Scientific Revolution, Steven Connor explains how "the rationalized 'Cartesian grid' of the visualist imagination" [33] posits "the perceiving self as a single point of view," a view "from which the exterior world radiates in regular lines." [34] There is a certain pretension towards omniscience about a mode of looking which values the world as an external plane of space, something ready to be penetrated, fragmented, and assimilated by the human gaze. Traditional narrative cinema attains its illusionistic power through a similar pretension, a complex relay of editing and mise-en-scène where objects are represented as clear forms in deep space, actions are localized within the space, and stable patterns of relation are established between each element in the frame. In her book *The Skin of the Film*, Laura U. Marks characterizes this mode of spectatorship as "optical visuality," a type of looking that necessarily stages a relationship of distance and separation between the viewing subject and the object of its vision. [35]

Optical looking lends itself usefully to the visualist functions of traditional narrative, but Marks feels there are also times

fairytale.

Still frames capture the city of light with a painterly romanticism far removed from the jagged formal assaults of *Beau travail*.

Our protagonist is Laure (Valérie Lemercier), a thirtysomething middle-class Parisian woman who gets caught alone in a citywide traffic jam on her way to start a new life with her boyfriend.

Laure's uncertainty over her impending lifestyle change is conveyed not through dialogue but a series of rhythmic visual strategies, such as this impressionistic superimposition of her old apartment over her face.

"when words, sounds, and images trap as much as they free: when giving expression to some things that are cinema's proper territory prevents the expression of something else." [36]

Drawing upon Gilles Deleuze's time-image cinema and Henri Bergson's model of multisensory perception, Marks promotes a theory of embodied spectatorship she terms haptic visuality – a mode of looking that closes the gap between subject and object by having "the eyes themselves function like organs of touch." [37] In contrast to optical vision, whose function is to distinguish forms and establish meaningful connections between them, a haptic look engages the perception of the whole body by encouraging a dynamic interplay between the senses. The eyes move across the screen in search of texture, less concerned with narrative meaning than with the affective materiality of the image as something that means in itself. The haptic mode of looking is thus well equipped to process a cinema of pure form – a cinema towards which Claire Denis has increasingly tiptoed.

Between *Beau travail* and *Vendredi soir*, Denis startled critics by taking a grisly detour into the body horror sub-genre. *Trouble Every Day* was an exceptionally morose, nonlinear film about two people (Vincent Gallo and Béatrice Dalle) stricken with a mysterious medical condition that, upon their sexual arousal, breeds a *Cat People*-style hunger for human flesh. Featuring long wordless passages punctuated by graphic bursts of sexual cannibalism, the film's genre trappings and metaphorical density allowed Denis to take an anthropological approach to the problem of desire. Its extreme (though non-pornographic) close-ups of copulating human bodies registered in an unusual manner: not as clear figurations or distinct forms, but as dislocated swatches that took several moments for the viewer to recognize and identify as muscle, hair or skin. As such, they created a haptic viewing experience in which the viewer's eyes, denied the narrative movement provided by deep-space representation, assumed an intimate, caressing relationship to the surfaces and textures that filled the frame. Viewers were "more inclined to move than to focus, more inclined to graze than to gaze." [38] And unlike its more acclaimed predecessor, *Trouble Every Day* featured no voiceover to lead the viewer – even if only astray – through its nightmares of the flesh. It was as though the failure of Galoup's narration in *Beau travail* had liberated Denis from hacking through useless thickets of verbal language. Coupled with Tindersticks' most minimal score to date, the effect was one of floating aimlessly, unmoored from any sense of perspective or spatio-temporal reality. Both the elimination of voiceover and haptic treatment of bodies in flagrante delicto were carried forward to her next film, though with very different results.

Vendredi soir tells the story of Laure (Valérie Lemercier), a thirty-something middle-class Parisian woman who gets caught alone in a citywide traffic jam on her way to start a new life with her boyfriend. Quietly anxious over her impending lifestyle change, she is emboldened by a strange voice from her car radio encouraging drivers to pick up commuters seeking refuge from the winter night. Acting on a whim, she extends her charity to Jean (Vincent Lindon), a charismatic mystery man in a dark suit; with only a handful of words exchanged, they share a tender brief encounter. We never find out what their jobs are, what kind of relationship Laure is in, or if Jean harbors any motivations beyond the physical. Nor are we granted any insight into what their respective pasts or futures hold, though we never labor under the illusion that they have a future together. The absence of exposition means that Denis' focus is again neither moral nor psychological, but experiential. She wants us to inhabit Laure's subjective experience of the night, which is transient, uncensored and precious. [39]

The sights and sounds of Laure's world are rendered with the kind of skin-like intimacy that necessarily invokes a haptic viewing experience. Without clusters of dialogue, the film unfurls as a proliferation of textures and surfaces, sensations and details that form impressionistic insights into our heroine's psyche. Over the course of the film, Laure indulges a few optical flights of whimsy that speak to the bittersweet magic-realism she sees in the world around her. Letters on a car

Stuck in traffic, she hears a radio DJ encouraging drivers to pick up commuters seeking refuge from the winter night.

A giant pair of neon blue spectacles blinking beside an optician's shop window underscores the sense that Laure does not quite know what she is looking for in life.

Enter Jean (Vincent Lindon), a charismatic mystery man in a dark suit.

Strangers connecting in a sea of cars. We never find out what their jobs are, what kind of relationship Laure is in, or if Jean harbors any

number-plate reconstitute themselves; a lampshade flies across the room, attaches itself to a light bulb and switches itself on; the arrangement of olives and anchovies on a pizza assumes the appearance of a face, which then smiles at her. While these fleeting visual projections are rendered with optical clarity, their lack of innate meaning ensures that our engagement with them is not a cognitive response to the causal chain of narrative but a tactile identification with an ephemeral gesture. Marks explains that haptic cinema calls upon the viewer's private storehouse of intuitions, perceptions and sense-associations to fill in the narrative blanks and feel our way through the film. Depending on our individual memory banks, these images might suggest that Laure is prone to unsatisfied, nostalgic yearnings for the impulsive spontaneity of childhood, when object relations answered to their own logic and everything felt possible. If this is the case, we may also surmise that she nurtures a buried romantic streak that still believes, against her better judgment, in the possibility of finding Prince Charming in a traffic jam.

The visual strategies through which Denis constructs the rhythms of *Vendredi soir* are recognizable to those familiar with her aesthetic. She employs suitably impressionistic lighting and a color palette that shifts from grainy desaturation to flashes of luminescence. There are dreamy dissolves and superimpositions, compositions that alternate between deep and shallow focus, and instances of slow motion so understated that they register less as camera tricks than as subliminal, first-person impressions. There are also fleeting moments of what Adrian Martin has termed "poetic undoing," a dissemination of interstitial shots that are detached from Laure's consciousness and the spatio-temporal reality of our story-world – a lone woman walking along an empty road; Paris reduced to the harsh blur of a street lamp; the empty space of Laure's deserted apartment. [40] The import of these lyrical apparitions is again purely sensual and symbolic rather than functional in any narrative sense. Taken collectively, the jazz-like variations of mood and tempo trigger unexpected overlaps and correspondences within the viewer's perceptual field, encouraging him or her to surrender the optical mastery associated with narrative and instead assume a pleasurably haptic relationship to the screen.

As with *Beau travail*, sound plays a crucial role in drawing us into the rhythms of lived experience. Denis frequently switch-hits between lulling the viewer into cavernous aural spaces and spitting him/her back out into auditory self-awareness. The long intro scene, with establishing shots of Parisian rooftops, apartment windows and motorways shot in dusky twilight and set to Hinchliffe's ethereal main theme, positions the film halfway between travelogue and urban fairytale. Our dreamy illusion is rudely interrupted by the excoriating sound of Laure rolling a strip of masking tape over cardboard boxes as she hesitantly packs up her possessions. There is a similar dynamic shift a while later, when Laure briefly slips away from Jean's disarming in-car seduction to telephone a friend who is expecting her for dinner. In this scene, the screeching cry of the friend's baby on the other end of the line (again, a naturalistic sound effect that is miked up higher than usual in films) serves to auditize the very commitment fears Laure wants to escape on this fateful Friday night.

While such moments expand upon *Beau travail*'s exploration of unsettling auditory contrasts, Denis' chief sonic concern in this film is the illusion of silence. *Vendredi soir* often turns the sound down so low that it is left to Hinchliffe's lush, twinkly score to remind us that we are not watching a silent film. Of course, what we generally regard as silence in a contemporary film are simply those moments bereft of spoken dialogue, diegetic or soundtrack music, or large-scale sound effects. One of the more subversive qualities of *Vendredi soir* is the manner in which its audio track is furnished with an intricate layer of micro-sounds from

motivations beyond the physical.
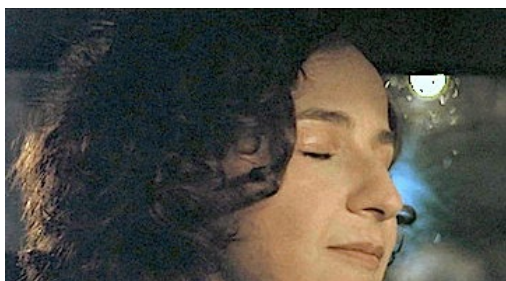
Though she has quit smoking, Laure finds herself pleasurably enveloped in the warmth of Jean's cigarette smoke on this freezing night.

start to finish: rather than a silent film, it is a subliminally noisy one. Several moments initially translate as silent or near silent due to their absence of dialogue, music, or action-based, plot-propelling sound effects. Yet even on a passive viewing, we subconsciously absorb the bustling undergrowth of sonic flora and fauna Denis locates in such moments – the mild breeze of the urban night, the faint click-clack of Laure's high heels as she walks along a quiet curb, the hum of distant traffic when Laure and Jean find themselves on a ghostly backstreet. [41] While Marks' chief concern lies with the tactile properties of the image, she also acknowledges the haptic potential of sound in forming an embodied and multisensory viewing experience:

> "Of course we cannot literally touch sound with our ears, just as we cannot touch images with our eyes; but as vision can be optical or haptic, so too hearing can perceive the environment in a more or less instrumental way. We listen for specific things, while we hear ambient sound as an undifferentiated whole. One might call "haptic hearing"that usually brief moment when all sounds present themselves to us undifferentiated, before we make the choice of which sounds are most important to attend to." [42]

If Marks considers all sounds haptic until they resolve into aural clarity, there are other theorists for whom hearing is an innately haptic experience. The music therapist Edith Lecourt, who writes of the "subjective ear noises" [43] of deaf patients prone to auditory hallucinations of distant choirs and disembodied voices, defines hearing as "a veritable acoustic womb" [44] that envelops us from birth to death:

> "Sound reaches us from everywhere, it surrounds us, goes through us." [45]

Given that we cannot ever pinpoint its location in space, confine its operation to our ears alone, or hear it for the same functional purposes that we do in mainstream cinema, sound is unusually well adapted to haptic representation. Connor suggests that

> "our vulnerability to the alterity of sound – or of sound as the sign of alterity – is vulnerability to the doubled self of the man-made; man-made sound emanates from 'us', but assails and pervades us from an enigmatically indefinite 'out there'" [46]

Go to page 4

Laure in *Vendredi soir* is confronted with the same tensions between optical and auditory modes of experience that terrorized Galoup in *Beau travail*. On three occasions in the first 35 minutes, she is shown rubbing her fists to her eyes in a combination of sleepiness and disillusionment. The sense that she does not quite know what she is looking for in life is underscored when she first lays eyes on Jean, framed as a gauzy dissolve from a giant pair of neon blue spectacles blinking beside an optician's shop window. Later, after phoning her friend to cancel dinner, she loses her bearings and briefly panics that he has absconded with her car and belongings. "Have you seen my car?"she incredulously asks a fellow driver; "It was just here." (The man's response is predictably sarcastic: "In front of me? And you can't find it. It must've flown off.")

Unwittingly sparking a battle of wills, Jean attempts to navigate out of the traffic jam by taking the wheel and speeding down a backstreet.

Laure, still uncertain whether she wants to surrender control to this seductive stranger, passively surveys life from the passenger seat.

Urban tableau flies past the window, a time-travelling blur of neon lights, buildings and shop-fronts.

Laure's vision, chronicled through choppy, dislocated framings of Jean's hands on the wheel, is rendered haptic by the speed at which they travel.

The sensory conflicts of the film's first half climax in an odd, ambiguous scene that inadvertently brings their romantic dilemma to boiling point. Unwittingly sparking a battle of wills, Jean attempts to navigate out of the traffic jam by taking the wheel and powering the car down a backstreet. Laure, still uncertain whether she wants to surrender control to this seductive stranger, passively surveys life from the passenger seat. Urban tableau flies past the window, a time-travelling blur of neon lights, buildings and shop-fronts as Bernard Herrmann-esque strings saw and chop anxiously on the soundtrack. Laure's vision, chronicled up close in choppy, dislocated framings of Jean's hands and collar, has become seriously compromised, reflecting "the unsteadiness of the ways of looking and seeing characteristic of city life – the glance or the glimpse rather than the sustained gaze."[47] [open endnotes in new window] Blinded by sensory overload, she demands that her travelling companion stop the car and let her out.

The travelling companions' encounter is abruptly cut short when, blinded by sensory overload, she demands that he stop the car and

let her out.

The film becomes charged with desire. Having reconciled at a nearby café, Laure and Jean brush past each other in slow motion on the stairs.

Laure and Jean give in to their desire as they kiss on the street.

Moving to a drab hotel room, they embrace like lifelong lovers.

The scene expresses a common condition of the postmodern urban consciousness, where "the molestations of vision brought about by urban experience" [48] inevitably lead to a psychic loss of control, and with it an alienating sense of suspicion about the accuracy of visual knowledge. Denis now cements the visualist critique by self-consciously drawing our attention to the haptic role that sound is playing in this drama. We may not be specifically aware of the car engine humming in the background, but its low rumble has functioned as a sympathetic vibration through the first half of the film, lulling us into a warm envelope of mechanical sound as surely as Grégoire Colin drifts to sleep to the rhythm of his coffee percolator in *Nénette et Boni*. The occasional metronomic ticking of the indicator brings an extra note of musicality to the mix.

Following Laure's demand to stop the car, Jean makes an abrupt exit, and his erstwhile companion, confused and regretful, moves to switch off the ignition. As long as the engine is running, there is a feeling that this dalliance could go somewhere, but as the ignition fizzles out, we feel a bassy pulse leaving our innards. Hence the scene forms a lo-fi epiphany in the middle of the film, louding our sensitivity to Denis' haptic treatment of micro-sound in physical space. As viewers, our body has become both Laure's body and the car's body, so the sense of deflated hope when Jean leaves the womb-like interior hits surprisingly hard. [49]

Just as the rhythmic structure of *Beau travail* was articulated to the viewer as a formal symbol of human emotion, *Vendredi soir* appeals to progressively deeper planes of psychic engagement through its tactile complex of image and sound. Because haptic cinema blurs the dynamic boundaries between the viewing subject and the object of its vision, it necessarily appeals to raw, embodied perception and a more intuitive, vulnerable mode of spectatorship than is possible within traditional narrative. In this regard, Marks has spoken of the propensity for haptic media to invoke the mimetic faculty of a viewer's perception. She defines mimesis (from the Greek *mimeisthai* – "to imitate") as a type of artistic representation "based on a particular, material contact at a particular moment." [50] Mimetic art has the power to reactivate our forgotten sense-experiences by assuming their material form and reinscribing their presence within our bodies. In doing so, it can bring us into direct contact with the indexical traces of our own lost memories:

> "We move between seeing the object, recalling virtual images that it brings to mind, and comparing the virtual object thus created with the one before us. This viewing process reactivates a viewer's complex of memory-images at the same time that it creates the object for perception." [51]

Our eyes caress the frame as Jean undresses Laure. Subjectivity is expressed through intimate but dislocated close-ups of body parts – a common figuration of haptic cinema.

The love scene assumes the aspect of caretaking and fetal embrace as Jean's fingers dance over Laure's skin.

As with Denis' previous film *Trouble Every Day*, fragments of flesh are shot so close-up that it is often difficult to distinguish which body part occupies the frame at any given moment. But where the sex scenes in that film descended into nightmares, this one plays out as a pleasant dream.

Laure returns the compliment by paying attention to Jean's feet. She wonders if a blister on his heel led him to seek refuge in her car.

Vendredi soir features the cinema's most purely haptic love scene to date – an audiovisual poem of surfaces, textures and sensations that the viewer comes to experience as a flash of infant memory.

The grainy, under-lit flatness of the love scene is not merely a haptic signifier of primordial infant vision, but an attempt to mimetically re-immerse the viewer in that first bath of sound and touch which, once lost, is gone forever.

The subliminal burble of the space heater now assumes the sonic role of the car engine, supplying the film with an ambient ghost of mechanical rhythm.

Denis pushes the mimetic capacity of haptic cinema to its fullest potential in *Vendredi soir's* love scene. The minor miracle of this sequence is not that it is almost wordless, or that it lasts seven minutes, or even that it feels far more romantic than one would expect from a depiction of a one-night stand in a low-rent hotel room. Rather it is the manner in which the viewer's pretenses toward a distant, optical identification with the screen are renounced by a visual set-up that uncannily evokes the sensation of slipping into a dream. The surface plane of the screen is flattened, the framing is de-centered, the focus is fuzzy and shallow, the colors are bleached into different shades of sepia and gray, and the lighting is so underexposed that large portions of the screen are blacked out. As with *Trouble Every Day,* fragments of flesh are shot so close-up that it becomes difficult to distinguish which body part occupies the frame at any given moment. Where the sexual assignations in that film ended in horrifying violence, this one sustains its weightless state of grace. Optical vision is debased so that other senses can flourish: we are informed of the blister on Jean's foot, the smell of rubber on Laure's hands after opening a condom; we warm to the sparse minutiae of the hotel room and the golden glow of the space heater, whose subliminal burble now assumes the duty of the car engine in supplying an ambient ghost of mechanical rhythm. Our eyes caress the frame as Jean undresses Laure, fingers dancing over her skin, arms cradling her in a fetal embrace while Hinchliffe's score swells around them like a womb. The only reason none of this feels voyeuristic is because Denis' haptic form has so thoroughly activated the mimetic response: it feels like it is happening to us.

The mode of psychic engagement proposed by *Vendredi soir* powerfully evokes the French psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu's theory of the skin ego, in which nine metaphorical psychic functions are attributed to the human skin. One of the earliest of these functions is a so-called "acoustic envelope," wherein the newborn infant develops the illusion of being fused with its mother in a two-way skin. This

Laure and Jean enjoy a late supper at an Italian restaurant, though a request to hurry their food order and the bickering of a couple at a nearby table suggests the return of the social world.

Laure's pizza reflects her rapture by smiling back at her.

skin is experienced not in terms of sight, but as a luxurious bath of sound and touch. As Steven Connor explains,

> "The skin ego is formed from, and remains powerfully associated with, sensory impressions which are previsual or at best weakly visual. We may surmise that the skin ego comes into being in the infant's early attempts to perpetuate or recreate the conditions obtaining in the womb, in which its existence is organized almost wholly in terms of taste, touch and hearing, and in particular a powerful combination of the last two." [52]

At this stage of the infant's development there is no clear demarcation between tactile and auditory sensations, so the feeling of being embraced by the mother is experienced through the enveloping warmth of her voice. With a little luck, this same warmth can be metaphorically "revived in the experience of [sexual] love, in which each, holding the other in their arms, envelops the other while being enveloped by them." [53] In this context, we may appreciate the grainy, under-lit flatness of *Vendredi soir*'s love scene as not merely a haptic signifier of primordial infant vision, but an attempt to mimetically re-immerse the viewer in that first bath of sound and touch which, once lost, is gone forever. The sense of psychic revelation induced by the mimetic mode of spectatorship also supports Susanne Langer's thesis that non-narrative art forms appeal to our intuitive knowledge of the inner life, and thus have the power to generate those moments of sudden understanding "which the mind reads in a flash, and preserves in a disposition or an attitude." [54]

Laure briefly experiences psychic re-immersion with Jean, but the mundane reality of the social world bursts their bubble of post-coital bliss: a snooty bellboy talks too much; a restaurant waiter asks them to hurry their food order; a couple bickers at a nearby table. They enjoy another sexual encounter in the bathroom, but the stroke of midnight heralds a Cinderella-like fall to earth. Their third attempt at lovemaking, back at the hotel, is a non-starter. Laure, suddenly turned off by Jean's touch, pushes his body away, and he falls asleep.

The superimposed memory of their lovemaking provides all the dialogue they need.

The couple enjoys another brief encounter in the bathroom.

She slips away in the middle of the night, leaving Jean the car as a sentimental gift. Against the blue dawn of the street, her pace quickens. She has not been devastated by her night with him, but it has left her a little different, and as Connor notes, the "birth into difference accomplished in and through the skin is also a birth into vision." [55] Running faster now, Laure passes another pair of neon blue spectacles by an optician's shop window; this pair, however, do not blink. Comfortable in her skin, at ease in her environment, Laure smiles radiantly as the fairytale theme twinkles around her for the last time. [56]

Our pleasure at the ending of *Vendredi soir* consists in witnessing Laure's desire being gently satisfied where Galoup's was cruelly, indefinitely deferred in *Beau travail*. Words are still few and far between, but for once we see a Claire Denis character making the transition from a vision that mutilates and degrades the other senses into one that harmonically integrates them in a new democracy. The fact that this happy ending sheds light on the film's dormant Cinderella subtext

Jean cradles Laure on the street as the stroke

only underscores the painful elusiveness of that transition for the rest of us. In this regard, there are obvious limitations to the mimetic response induced by a haptic viewing experience. Yet the specific constellations of sound, touch and image that constitute a Denis film means that to watch one is to surrender ourselves for a few hours to a strange fugue state, somewhere between a waking trance and a lucid dream. *Beau travail* proposes a cinematic form that shatters the laws of narrative in order to articulate the rhythms of the psyche. *Vendredi soir* presents us with the gift of being suspended, weightless and afloat, in a cocoon of amniotic fluid. In both cases, Denis seems to be giving us a chance to start over.

Laure slips away in the middle of the night, leaving Jean the car as a gift to remember her by.

Against the blue dawn of the street, her pace quickens.

Laure runs past another pair of neon blue spectacles by an optician's shop window; this pair, however, do not blink.

A future with Jean was never on the cards. Instead their Friday night has functioned as a fleeting return to infant subjectivity, and a gentle birth into vision.

Comfortable in her skin, at ease in her environment, Laure smiles radiantly as the fairytale theme twinkles around her for the last time.

Go to Notes page

Notes

1. Deleuze, 201. [[return to page 1 of essay](#)]

2. I am inclined to agree with Adrian Martin's assessment of *White Material* as one of Denis' more qualified successes, and for the same reason: Denis' political critique of postcolonial Africa and her narrative, audiovisual stylizations are typically potent, but they operate within the context of a star vehicle for the commanding presence of Isabelle Huppert, who had originally propositioned Denis to adapt Doris Lessing's 1950 novel *The Grass is Singing*. Huppert's Maria Vial is a headstrong French coffee farmer determined to bring in the harvest at her plantation despite the eruption of a brutal civil war, and in Martin's words she feels like "a distant relative of Bette Davis in any number of 1930s and '40s melodramas." *White Material*'s function as star vehicle restricts Denis from exploring "the meaning of actor/character-as-body" (Beugnet) as convincingly as her other films, as well as from pushing images and sounds as elements that carry meaning in themselves.

3. Staples scored *L'intrus* as a solo project, as did Hinchliffe with *Vendredi soir*. Tindersticks are credited as a full band with the scores for *Nénette et Boni, Trouble Every Day, 35 Shots of Rum* and *White Material*. The soundtrack of *Beau travail* features a mixture of pop artists (Corona, Tarkan, Neil Young) and excerpts from Benjamin Britten's 1951 opera *Billy Budd*.

4. Antonioni is actually one of those filmmakers, like Pasolini, Rossellini and Renoir, whom Schrader locates on the margins of transcendental style. (I mention him above because I see less of a kinship between Denis and the third director whom Schrader focuses his central thesis upon, Carl Theodor Dreyer.) *35 Shots of Rum* ranks as Denis' most purely transcendental project to date, doubtless because she conceived it as a tribute to Ozu's father-daughter domestic drama *Late Spring* (1949).

5. Beugnet, 21.

6. Smith, 2005.

7. Beugnet, 27.

8. Langer, 1991, 78.

9. Beugnet, 14.

10. Deleuze, 201.

11. Romney, 2000.

12. Denis on an itinerant childhood spent travelling through colonial Africa:

> "I remember being dazzled by the beauty of the Red Sea, the desert. You don't forget a landscape like that. I always thought of Djibouti as a place where human history hasn't really begun yet – or perhaps it's already over. There's something in the landscape that's stronger than human civilization. There's no agriculture, for example, and there are live volcanoes. And there's the Legion."(Romney, 2000)

13. Of special interest for their aesthetic and intertextual links with *Beau travail* are Eisenstein's *Strike* (1925), Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1935) and *Olympia* (1938), Genet's *Un chant d'amour* (1950), Jarman's *Sebastiane* (1976) and Fassbinder's *Querelle* (1982). The film also bears a self-consciously intertextual relationship to Jean-Luc Godard's once-controversial Algerian War critique *Le petit soldat* (1963), in which Michel Subor played a young exile caught up with revolutionary groups, also named Bruno Forestier.

14. It is tempting to read this scene as a tongue-in-cheek, queer pastiche of the showdown between gunfighters Henry Fonda and Charles Bronson in Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968), wherein they circle each other slowly before opening fire.

15. Thompson, 202.

16. Langer, 1991, 72.

17. Langer, 78.

18. Martin, 2006. []

19. Beugnet, 119.

20. Ibid, 110.

21. Romney, 2000.

22. Jean-Michel Frodon has made a similar observation about the manner in which Denis' films

> "radically modify the status of the shot. The shot ceases to be the narrative and plastic unit with which the sequences that compose the film as a whole are built. The shot as unit becomes the shot as stroke or line, a visual sign that, only through its combination with other signs, will call forth a mental recomposition producing emotions and meaning" (2002).

Frodon, however, sees the editing rhythms as less informed by music than the aesthetics of contemporary kung-fu cinema.

23. Langer, 1991, 71.

24. Connor, 1997, 211.

25. Langer, 1991, 68.

26. Connor, 1997, 207.

27. Ibid.

28. Langer, 1991, 73.

29. Langer, 82.

30. Ibid.

31. Langer, 1991, 72. [return to page 3]

32. Murch, 2000.

33. Connor, 1997, 207.

34. Ibid.

35. Marks, 162.

36. Ibid, 129.

37. Ibid, 162.

38. Ibid.

39. When asked whether she ever enjoys films with snappy dialogue, Denis responded that:

> "when it's good, I really enjoy it. The only thing is, the type of story I like to tell is another sort of dialogue – it's the dialogue between sound and movement, and feelings and emotion."(Cochrane, 2009)

40. Martin, 2006.

41. In some ways, Denis' take on subliminal sound recalls the celebrated opening montage of David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986), where an arch compendium of life in a picture-postcard suburban Midwest finally settles upon the scene of a middle-aged man hosing his Norman Rockwell lawn before having a heart attack. From this shot, the camera slowly burrows beneath the grass to uncover a nest of bugs building their secret subterranean home... and with it, a parallel sound-world that crunches, seethes and slithers at the edge of our consciousness.

42. Marks, 183.

43. Jacobus, 135.

44. Ibid, 133.

45. Connor, 214.

46. Ibid, 209.

47. Ibid, 210. [return to page 4]

48. Ibid.

49. According to Beugnet, on *Vendredi soir* Denis and Ughetto

> "had the opportunity to mix the sound with a SR surround system that recreates a rich and textured sound and generates a heightened feeling of being enveloped in it" (193).

50. Marks, 138.

51. Ibid, 148.

52. Connor, 2004, 50.

53. Segal, 47.

54. Langer, 80.

55. Connor, 2004, 50.

56. The fact that Laure only attains this blissful (and presumably temporary) state of visual integrity after a sexual encounter with a man could be said to undermine the film's feminist value, though the focus on her pleasure suggests otherwise. Beyond considerations of gender, the notion that good sex functions as a mind-cleansing visual restorative has enjoyed a broad cultural currency. See the sex scene between Gina Gershon and Jennifer Tilly in *Bound* (1996). Gershon plays a just-released convict who presumably has not had sex in a long time. Lying back in post-coital bliss after her first tryst with Tilly, she sighs wistfully, "I can see again."

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Alex approaches a traumatic confrontation in *Irréversible* (Gaspar Noé, 2003) …

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… and later enjoys a calm moment that is "before" the violence …

… but Marcus loses himself in the desire for vengeance.

Time after time: cinema, trauma, and (a)temporality

review by Allan Cameron

Todd McGowan, *Out of Time: Desire in Atemporal Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011). 296 pages.

The emergence, since the mid-1990s, of popular films featuring achronological narrative structures, labyrinthine multilinear plots, and the juxtaposition of parallel ontological worlds has attracted a growing amount of scholarly attention in recent years. Within the body of work exploring these films, time has been a central and ongoing concern.[1] [open endnotes in new window] This critical work has occurred, furthermore, within the context of a broader resurgence of interest in cinematic time, from the contingent temporality of early cinema's *actualités* to the increasingly malleable temporality of digital production and reception.[2] Although these analyses vary widely in their conclusions regarding the status of temporality within the contemporary mediascape, they are united, in the main, by a shared investment in time as a bearer of cultural, political and social value.

The startling conceit at the heart of Todd McGowan's book *Out of Time*, however, is that the real significance of recent complex film narratives lies outside of time altogether. In the shuffled narratives of films including *Peppermint Candy* (Lee Chang-dong, 1999), *21 Grams* (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2003), *Irréversible* (Gaspar Noé, 2003), *The Butterfly Effect* (Eric Bress and J. Mackye Gruber, 2004), and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Michel Gondry, 2004), McGowan finds an insistent emphasis not on temporal flow but on the repetition associated with trauma. Trauma shapes the lives of the characters (through violent episodes, the deaths of loved ones, or even the dissolution of relationships), but also the films' characteristic narrative loops, overlaps, and switchbacks.

Beginning with Freud's assertion that the unconscious sees past, present, and future on the same plane (xi), McGowan sees traumatic repetition in these films as fundamentally atemporal. In returning us again and again to a crucial constitutive loss (which often goes unrepresented but manifests itself in narrative ellipses and repetitions), these films remind us that "no amount of time allows us to escape the hold that loss has over us" (14), particularly since trauma itself, according to this Lacanian account, provides the very grounds

Faces of grief and guilt in *21 Grams* (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2003): Paul is on the verge of death …

… Cristina confronts the loss of her husband and children …

… and Jack punishes himself for the accident that claimed them.

for subjectivity (232). These "atemporal" films thus depart radically from the cinema of the "time-image" championed by Gilles Deleuze (33).[3] Indeed, McGowan sees their nonlinear temporal articulations as representative of the "spatialization" of time that so alarmed modernist thinkers such as Henri Bergson (33).[4]

McGowan's bold move is to frame this spatialization in positive terms, by connecting it with certain tendencies of the digital era. He argues that digital technologies, by collapsing temporal boundaries and making objects of desire available to us instantaneously, short-circuit the prospective temporality associated with capitalism, which aims constantly at the future satisfaction of present desires. These technologies accelerate capitalism's spatialization of time, bringing the promise of desire's fulfilment from the future into the present, and thereby unmasking its fundamental emptiness (27-28). Connecting his selection of films to this contemporary digital moment, McGowan argues that their repetitive articulation of "atemporality" is also aimed at undermining desire. By depriving desire of its orientation toward the future, these atemporal films transform desire into "the drive" (or, in Freudian terms, the death drive) (32-33). McGowan writes,

> "Desire represents a belief that a satisfying object exists and can be obtained. In contrast, the drive locates enjoyment in the movement of return itself – the repetition of the loss, rather than in what might be recovered" (11).

What McGowan values in "atemporal cinema" is its privileging of the drive over future-oriented desire, and its acknowledgement of subjectivity's necessary relation to trauma. Crucially, argues McGowan, the drive makes possible ethical behavior because, in contrast to desire, it does not lead us to regard other human beings as the means to an end. For this reason, McGowan sees atemporal films as "an ethical landmark in the history of cinema" (32).

McGowan's complex argument is bolstered by detailed analyses of eight key films. He carefully outlines, for example, the way that Quentin Tarantino's use of narrative loops and cultural clichés in *Pulp Fiction* (1994) aims to rehabilitate time by remaking such elements in the process of their repetition (41). Criticizing Tarantino's approach for its failure to come to terms with trauma, McGowan goes on to demonstrate how, in his view, films like *21 Grams* and *Irréversible* show that trauma and loss can never be transcended. In *21 Grams,* he finds a rejection of the "logic of exchange" that would seek to mitigate trauma through the process of organ donation (148-49) or the prospect of a new child (151). In keeping with the film's radically alinear plot, the violent tragedy that triggers the narrative can never be assigned to the past but remains instead a constant presence (139). Similarly, the reversed narrative structure of *Irréversible*, in which a violent murder and rape are followed by calmer and happier events that precede them chronologically, illustrates for McGowan that a time outside of trauma is in fact impossible (230). According to this model, "before" and "after" occupy the same ontological plane, meaning that every moment, including moments of peace and pleasure, is inflected by
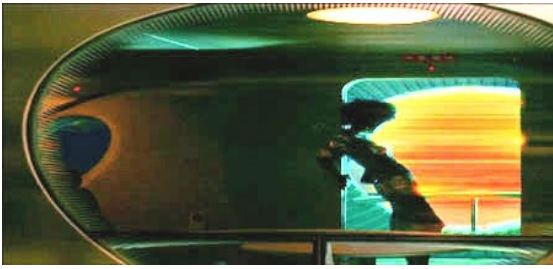
trauma. Trauma is thus "a part of bliss and inseparable from it" (216).

Whereas other writers have tended to emphasize differences as much as similarities among complex cinematic narratives, McGowan's interpretations display a remarkable degree of conceptual and hermeneutical unity. This sense of unity undoubtedly strengthens the book, but it also represents a key weakness. McGowan's approach is to test each of his chosen films, and a selection of others, for their adherence to his psychoanalytic perspective. Yet these readings are ultimately rather inflexible, and require attributing a high degree of rhetorical coherence to the films, while overlooking their internal contradictions and equivocations. McGowan's reading of *Irréversible*, for example, frames the film in didactic terms, finding the "key" to the film in the "errors of judgment" that the film first "induces" and then "corrects" in its spectators (211). This interpretative approach has a certain fragility, since it relies to a large extent on narrative resolutions and the quest for a final message or meaning. In the case of *The Butterfly Effect*, a slight difference between the ending of the DVD and theatrical releases is apparently sufficient to transform the film from an affirmation of temporality to an affirmation of the drive (77).

While I would agree that it is productive to approach films as vehicles for philosophical thought, treating them as fully developed conceptual statements is a risky strategy. What is overlooked here, I would argue, is the temporal agnosticism of these films, and the way that their alinear structures might suggest not simply an escape from time but the juxtaposition of different temporalities. Although McGowan offers compelling interpretations of his chosen films, his assertion that contemporary cinema "has once again revealed its bond with psychoanalytic theory" invests them with an artificial sense of conceptual congruence, attenuating their theoretical potential (xii).

Furthermore, McGowan's argument is sometimes underwritten by simplistic claims about relations among time, media, and psychoanalysis. For example, he suggests that the gaps produced by film editing and even projection correspond to the repetition of the death drive, an assertion that seems rhetorically satisfying yet conceptually insubstantial (xi). Similarly reductive is his characterization of digital technology, which

> "eviscerates the experience of authentic temporality, leaving contemporary subjects adrift in the experience of an eternal present" (25).

Although this is quite a familiar argument, it seems at best an exaggeration of the "effects" of digital mediation, and at worst, an unhelpful distortion. The conceptual opposition between repetition and temporality that underpins the entire argument is also open to question. According to McGowan, repetition in these films is associated with the "atemporality" of the unconscious. Yet narrative

Mind (Michel Gondry, 2004).

Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind: Does the resolution of the narrative entail the rejection of "temporal thinking" or an affirmation of time ...

... and what is the relationship between trauma and technology?

repetition can also be viewed as an index of the temporal, or a way of juxtaposing alternative temporal perspectives. Here, McGowan's narrow view of repetition is determined by his treatment of narrative alinearity as, in essence, a manifestation of psychological phenomena. Yet the multi-stranded narratives of *Pulp Fiction*, *21 Grams* and *Code Unknown* (Michael Haneke, 2000) are concerned not simply with individual psychology, but also with the connective networks that produce different configurations of social time.

For McGowan, "atemporal" films challenge twentieth century philosophy's bias towards temporal experience and mortal finitude. Collectively, they constitute a "new cinematic mode," which

> "marks the end of the twentieth century by bringing the psychoanalytic alternative into a wider cultural circulation" (30).

By implication, psychoanalysis itself emerges as the "repressed" term in twentieth century accounts of time, and offers a powerful critique of such accounts. Modern philosophy's attraction to temporal heterogeneity and openness, claims McGowan, is coextensive with the desire for "a better future" (15). This desire, not unlike the instrumental desire associated with capitalism, "leads us to treat others (and ourselves) as mere means to an end" (15). Despite the sophistication of McGowan's argument, it is here that his conceptual account begins to take on the qualities of a caricature. For an openness to time is not incommensurate with the acknowledgement that the very worst as well as the very best is possible. Moreover, an ethics of time cannot merely be reduced to instrumental desire. Indeed, perhaps the key ethical question of our times has to do with our treatment of species and environments other than our own, a question that involves humans being able to take a long temporal view, and possibly to imagine life on this planet proceeding without us. The atemporality of the drive, grounded in the human subject's experience of traumatic repetition, seems wholly inadequate to this task.

Perhaps aware of this problem, McGowan attempts to draw a distinction between biological and social time, suggesting that "the time of the biological world operates through constant change," while "no such constant change occurs in a social structure" (221). Yet this contrast "between the temporality of life and the eternity of the social structure" (221) depends on a rigid opposition between temporality and atemporality, while overlooking the coexistence of a range of different temporalities (biological, geological, cosmological, and social) that possess their own rhythms and scales. In contrast to McGowan, I would argue that cinema has an ethical imperative to engage with these other temporalities. Although narrative is an undeniably human articulation of time, it does not follow that films' temporal articulations are oriented only around the human psyche. Furthermore, it is not at all self-evident that calamitous social events should be treated in the same way as psychological traumas. By placing the subject's originary trauma at the centre of each narrative and reading every other conflict or collision through it, McGowan seems to close down rather than open up these films' ethical dimension.

Despite these reservations, this is an impressive and conceptually

ambitious book, which renders an array of complex, interconnected ideas in clear and readable terms. Although its unity of purpose leads in important instances to an oversimplification of concepts and a degree of hermeneutic inflexibility, it represents a provocative and productive intervention in the field. It should prompt scholars working in this area to reconsider the terms in which cinematic temporality is framed, to develop a more rigorous account of the relations between mediated space and time, and to acknowledge the important role that traumatic experience plays in a great many complex narratives.

One possible avenue for future exploration involves the relationship between trauma and technology. Considering film narratives that hinge upon ontological puzzles and mentally disturbed characters, Thomas Elsaesser argues that

> "'trauma-theory' is only one path to access the mind of mind-game protagonists"; we must also be prepared to "understand these illnesses as anthropomorphized versions of mathematical code and automated programs."[5]

The significance of technology is also invoked by Garrett Stewart's term "postsubjective virtuality"[6] and my own term "modular subjectivity,"[7] both of which reflect the ways in which characters access and manipulate their own temporal experience, producing new narratives of self and identity. These works thus place trauma within a broader frame, which takes into account such factors as the films' technological provenance, their specific deployment of digital effects, and the way that aspects of technologized work and leisure are reflected in their narrative convolutions. Films such as *The Butterfly Effect*, *Memento* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* might thus be viewed not only in terms of the traumatic events that appear to break apart their narratives, but also the opportunities for temporal control and ordering that become available to their respective protagonists. Thomas Elsaesser has suggested that the traumatic histories and mental aberrations depicted in many such films take the form of "productive pathologies," which can allow the characters to overcome the laws of physics (via time travel, or example) but also, in less extreme cases, to cope with "man-made, routinized, or automated surroundings."[8] These productive pathologies, rather than cancelling out time, serve to affirm it, because they

> "indicate that 'trauma' is not only something that connects a character to his or her past, but also opens up to a future."[9]

The traumas that structure such films are thus not simply manifestations of atemporality, but can also (often in conjunction with technologies of mediation) be the means for affirming time.

Ultimately, whether trauma or technology forms the central focus in investigating complex cinematic narratives, the status of time itself remains a significant issue. The term "spatialization" has often been used to describe the way in which the unbroken "flow" of time championed by Henri Bergson is turned into static, rationalized representations by scientific and technological mediation.[10] The notion of spatialization forms the basis for McGowan's argument about

atemporality. It also informs Garrett Stewart's discussion of digital imagery in contemporary cinema, which presents

> "the spatialized configuration of time itself as in its own right a malleable *medium.*"[11]

Spatialization certainly offers a compelling perspective on temporal representations and interfaces, yet it is time to ask whether this term, inherited from Bergson and reused by writers from Joseph Frank to Fredric Jameson, also limits our understanding of temporal phenomena.[12] First, the use of "spatialization" often implies that space and time are opposed and thus underemphasizes their interdependence both within and beyond our everyday phenomenological experience. Second, it casts diverse modes of temporal representation together into a single moribund category, in which mediation leads ultimately to stasis. Although we have surely moved a long way from Bergson's emphasis on "duration" and temporal flow, I wonder whether we should accept as given this connection between mediation and stasis. Must we choose, in other words, between duration and spatialization, time that flows and time that is stilled or thwarted? If time, as John Urry points out, is always encountered through mediation since it is "invisible to the senses," then we should be prepared to explore further the diversity of temporal regimes produced through such mediation.[13] Work undertaken from this perspective would examine the alternative and overlapping temporalities that structure various media genres, including cinematic narratives. By foregrounding spatialization and atemporality, Todd McGowan's book should prompt us to think carefully about the terms in which we frame time and space, and to consider whether time, as a subject of ethical and narrative significance, still has a future.

Go to notes page

Notes

1. See, for example, Garrett Stewart's *Framed Time: Toward a Postfilmic Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), my own *Modular Narratives in Contemporary Cinema* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), and the essays in *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema*, ed. Warren Buckland (Malden MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), as well as special issues of the journals *Film Criticism* (31:1-2, 2006) and *The Velvet Light Trap* (no. 58, 2006). [return to page 1 of essay]

2. See Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion, 2006), and D.N. Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

3. See Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time Image* (London: Continuum, 2005).

4. See Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, trans. F.L. Pogson (London: S. Sonnenschein and Company, 1910).

5. Thomas Elsaesser, "The Mind-Game Film," in Warren Buckland (ed.), *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema* (Malden MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), p. 29.

6. Stewart, *Framed Time*, p. 211.

7. Cameron, *Modular Narratives*, p. 112.

8. Elsaesser, "The Mind-Game Film," p. 31.

9. Ibid.

10. See Bergson, *Time and Free Will.*

11. Stewart, *Framed Time*, p. 2.

12. See Joseph Frank, *The Idea of Spatial Form* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1991), p. 154; and Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1991), p. 154.

13. John Urry, "Speeding Up and Slowing Down," in Hartmut Rosa and William E. Scheurman(eds.) *High-Speed Society: Social Acceleration, Power, and Modernity* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009), p. 179.

The last word: days of whines and ruses

By the editors

As we finish editing this issue, in the United States the Presidential election is running full blast. It appears close, which is to say the country is evenly divided in choosing between two distinct versions of neoliberal capitalism: the more human and socially conscious one and the more corporate and unyielding one. Last year it was Republicans in Wisconsin attacking teachers and other public sector unions, this year it's Democrats doing the same thing in Chicago. Whoever is in charge, the basics remain the same: ever widening gap between the rich and everyone else, the economic decline of the middle class, loss of family wage jobs, assaults on unions in the private and public sectors, a high unemployment rate as the new normal, financialization of everything possible, bankers calling the shots and facing no significant reforms, corporations defined as people, and so on.

But rather than centering on the differences as they appear in political strategy, rhetoric, and marketing around the leading candidates, we'd like to consider the marked shift to an increasingly polarized public sphere. The Republicans have moved further to the right under the sway of the Tea Party and Christian fundamentalists to the point of preferring to put forward ideologically pure candidates even if they lose specific elections for Congress and state government. Moderates have been undermined, banished, and forced to retire.

In the aftermath of the Great Recession starting in 2008, the Republican long-term strategy was actively refusing any compromise with the Obama administration, blocking any amelioration of the crisis, and then using the stalemate as "proof" that Obama and Democrats should be replaced. Concomitant with that, all other issues became part of an increasingly polarized and antagonistic and adversarial pattern.

It's been widely observed, and increasingly documented with empirical research that the political polarization has lead to people increasingly choosing media that simply reflects and amplifies their existing views

rather than trying to learn about or learn from other views. But the growing polarization and amplification of political noise has genuine and deleterious effects not just on discourse, but also on understanding. Whereas in the past, different parties could mark their differences, measure them, and try to have a discussion that at least clarified the gap if it didn't form a bridge to cross it, today dogmatism drives out critical thought and the possibility of forming ideas.

Case in point, this past spring the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, a weekly newspaper that functions as the *Wall Street Journal* for U.S. colleges and universities, saw an eruption of hysterical controversy when a regular blogger on the *CHE* website offered an opinion piece on the validity of African American Studies. A few weeks earlier, a *CHE* staff reporter attended a conference event at Northwestern University celebrating the first group of graduate students completing their PhDs in the recently established Black Studies graduate program. A summary appeared reporting the occasion.

Northwestern had been excruciatingly slow in setting up such a graduate program. It established an undergraduate African American Studies program in the 1980s in response to student activism, but it resisted having a PhD, although many of its peer institutions had done so early on. But precisely because of this late start, the school managed to leapfrog a frequent problem of the "first generation" of African American studies PhD programs which were often shaped by faculty who were very progressive in advancing their field, but who were socially traditional or conservative in other aspects, and thus too often hostile to feminist and queer students, faculty and perspectives; to a more international and global perspective; to interdisciplinary studies; to media and cultural studies approaches, and so forth. By arriving very late to the party, Northwestern clearly recruited faculty and students with a much younger generation's perspective.

Reporting on the conference, the *CHE* described the weekend and highlighted several of the students finishing their dissertations. Many days later, the regular blogger, Naomi Schaefer Riley, who seemed to have been selected to represent a politically conservative viewpoint, offered her opinion in a piece entitled: "The Most Persuasive Case for Eliminating Black Studies? Just Read the Dissertations."

Rushing in, though rather late, Riley stuck her foot in it, arguing that African American Studies was not a valid intellectual enterprise. Her headline (which she apparently provided) said reading the student's dissertations made her case. However, the students had not finished their dissertations and the conference consisted of brief presentations of part of their work in progress. Therefore no one could "read the dissertations." Oblivious to that, Riley went ahead with her attack. The response was predictable and quickly hundreds of negative comments were added to the original posting: many pointed out the flaw of "proving" something from material that the author had not read; many

called Riley out on racist assumptions; some called for her dismissal as a blogger. With Twitter and Facebook users entering the fray, Riley's critics were soon joined by far Right defenders who attacked the critics. The controversy soared to over 1400 comments in a few days before the *CHE* shut down adding new comments. A few days later the *CHE* editors first defended Riley as promoting active discussion, then after a few more days, and the controversy erupting across other *CHE* blogs, finally ended her column. In her last post Riley didn't reverse herself or admit any problem but tried to just brazen it out.

Predictably, Riley supporters decried the *Chronicle* for ending her "freedom of speech," and so forth (rather neatly ignoring that the *Chronicle* is a for-profit business corporation and has no obligation to promote civil liberties that mess with its bottom line). Many of them had to finesse or admit that at best Riley had offered only a knee-jerk right wing critique that was intellectually indefensible, and that the collection of her previous columns had suffered from the same problem of no research, no rigorous thought about the issues, and a totally casual presentation which amounted to presenting an attitude rather than arguing an opinion.

While the dynamics of the events were interesting, particularly in showing the power of social media, even in an academic setting, to quickly create a crowd of flaming comments on both sides, in retrospect the incident stands as another example of the heightened polarization of discourse in the United States. While it might be expected, even "normal" in the political sphere, especially in an election season, the spill over into intellectual, academic, and scholarly discussion and decision-making is increasingly clear. Another dramatic example was provided over the summer when the governing body of the University of Virginia forced the resignation of its new president, in office for only two years. Faculty and students were appalled and quickly responded to what turned out to be a high handed move by the Rector (head) of the Board of Visitors to change things by consulting for only a few moments by phone with a few members of the board, arguing (incorrectly as it turned out) that the president was not moving fast enough to implement new digital instruction systems. The source of the "let's run it like a for-profit corporation" Rector's impulse? *A Wall Street Journal* pundit's opinion piece that higher education could save money and leapfrog into the future with MOOC instruction. The tantalizing sizzle of Massive Open Online Course instruction hype simply overcame any reasoned thought and short circuited asking deeper questions or looking at possible consequences. After a couple of weeks, the president was re-instated.

The United States has an excruciating history of Know-Nothingism and active repression of the most elementary science, dismissal of historical facts that contradict prejudices, and so forth. In the past this was demonstrated by the long shadow of the Scopes trial over teaching evolution; today we see it featured in the chorus of denial that humans have any possible effect on Earth's climate. The ideological

polarization is inflated by new developments. The Twitterverse allows instant and uninformed opinion to travel far and fast. An increasingly active view of education from pre-school through advanced graduate work as a consumer good rather than a social good fuels the climate. The privatization of education funding, which includes the gutting of state support for public schools and the resulting increase in student tuition which ends up being paid by student debt which can never be discharged, even by bankruptcy.

In the fight over public opinion, the Right has gradually been learning how to get its message out. This goes far beyond the obvious case of Rupert Murdoch's newspapers and Fox News distortion, far beyond the exclamatory ranting of the now decades old right wing talk radio and evangelical television. Slowly, often clumsily, the right has been producing feature films that actually have some niche space in the multiplexes. Many of these have been documentary "exposés" imitating the model of Michael Moore's serio-comic investigations. For example, *Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed* (2008) tried to argue that there is a vast conspiracy in higher education against the newly labeled version of Creationism called "Intelligent Design." Far Right ideologue Dinesh D'Souza produced *2016: Obama's America* just in time for the current election season and managed to get bookings into many multiplexes thus parlaying the $2.5M estimated budget into $32M theatrical by the end of September. Deep pocket conservative businessmen have poured money into attempts to create plausible dramas from libertarian or fundamentalist favorites: drawn from Ayn Rand's massive novel, *Atlas Shrugged: Part I* (2011) is being followed by Part II, despite execrable reviews by mainstream reviewers of the first one. On the other hand two other sponsored films driving an anti-teacher-union agenda and promotion of charter schools have been moderately successful: the documentary *Waiting for "Superman"* (2010, $6.4M in 3 months, theatrical) and the dramatic feature *Won't Back Down* (2012, still in release). Conceivably, right wing agenda driven films could add to the lively discussion of important issues. But that also depends on the cultural climate.

It was fairly clear from the actual day President Obama won the election that he intended to work together, to compromise, to get an agenda moving forward. This was most obvious on the financial front where he set a goal of simply recovering what could be salvaged, of stopping the downflow of the Great Recession, of saving banks and auto making, by working with many of the people and institutions that had created the disaster in the first place. But from the get-go the Republicans, fired by their Tea Party base, openly declared they would not cooperate, compromise, or respond to any invitations. The marching orders from day one were clear: decry, obstruct, delay, blame. Polarization was the norm. That same attitude has simply spread through the culture. Belligerence is the norm. In this context something like Naomi Schaeffer Riley's ignorant stubbornness becomes the norm. Refuse to back down, no apology, no regrets, no concessions.

The polarization, we'd argue, rather than contributing to debate and discussion, through a sifting of claims and a balancing between differences, leading to an informed resolution or thoughtful compromise, simply continues the exhaustion, exclusion, and frustration. Rather than moving forward, stagnation becomes the norm. Compromise is impossible and disintegration, inevitably, begins. After a while it has to be recognized that indeed this is the plan, this is the goal: ratcheting up the impasse so finally almost anything seems like relief.

But if there's no immediate relief in sight, what is to be done? It's always necessary and worthwhile to answer the barrage of right wing fear mongering, if only to show there is an alternative view. But it is also useful to turn the matter to a deeper discussion. To return to the Riley example, it was easy to point out her total ignorance when she dismissed a student working on the topic of black midwives and another on real estate "redlining" (discrimination against minority loans) in Chicago. Both had well documented histories that Riley ignored. But the deeper question which applies not only to Riley but the whole current conservative apparatus is this: Why is it the Right which is so fixated on identity and difference? And with the crudest possible imagining of what identity is? This goes so far as the recurrent Tea Party meme of asking if Barack Obama is American, or if he is black enough. What it boils down to is the desire and need of the right to contain people of color, women (particularly in terms of reproduction rights at present), queers, immigrants, students and youth, the unemployed and underemployed, the people in mortgage and foreclosure hell.

Yet those are the people who suddenly became present a year ago in the Occupy Wall Street movement. It took a great effort to try to exclude those folks from common public space, but the goal of the power structure was clear: to not allow those people to express their own concerns, their own identity, their own sense of what the goals should be and how to get there. The public face of OWS has declined, and significantly changed. But the underlying desire for and need to express an alternative vision is there, and will be there, appearing in different forms, mutating into different places and directions. Whatever happens in the election, the ferment will continue.

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